

ANY NUMBER
CAN PLAY

■

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

SOME WE LOVED

TOLD WITH A DRUM

LIGHT OVER RUBY STREET

■

ANY NUMBER CAN PLAY

BY

EDWARD HARRIS HETH



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ANY NUMBER CAN PLAY

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**ANY NUMBER
CAN PLAY**

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In this game any number can play, each placing upon the table the entire sum he is willing to forfeit.

. . . According to Hoyle

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Part One: THE BIG PLACE

CHAPTER ONE

THE LONG night that was to come already hung in the air at six o'clock. In the corner of the big room the men playing rummy shuffled the cards with a sound of distant wind. They played rummy because they were waiting and dealt the cards without passion—a game to mark time. They waited as they did each day between the afternoon horse-betting crowd and the nighttime crowd—it was not a gambler's game, but a game to make the time pass until night began. It was only the cards slipping against their fingers that they enjoyed, like the touch of something alive. They waited for something else, for the long hours ahead, for the rattle of chips, the soft roll of dice, the voices of the gamblers whispering to their money like men in love.

None of them knew how long the night would be. They played quietly. The stillness echoed the stillness outside. The siege of heat had ended all at once—it came too late, midway in September, when the days were already strong with the winter ahead. In a spasm of relief as the heat fell away the trees shook themselves alive, the lake churned as though it would rear to its feet and the idlers who had run to the beaches went sadly home again. By six o'clock it was cold. But there were those in the gambling place—a few who lived there like Frieda, with his big sleepy face, or the colored porter Sleigh—who had not even known of the heat. They hardly knew it was September outside, since they lived indoors night and day, not setting foot

through the doorway except to meet the Chinaman who brought them their food. This was their home, the big place with the crap tables and wheels and stale smoke of last night's men.

Occasionally one of the men at the rummy table would glance up toward Frieda, lumbering in his carpet-slipped feet as he brought out the new decks of cards, still sealed in their cases, or the boxes of dice from the office; or toward Pete Senta, sitting alone on a stool near the bookies' cages, filing his perfect nails, the thin strip of file flashing from the half-darkened room; or toward Sleigh, when he went to answer the knock on the thick metal door. But it was only the Chinaman who was at the door, bringing the tray of food for Frieda and Sleigh, a white napkin over the tray making the food seem more tempting than it was. The men playing cards watched the Chinaman and nodded with indifference to his grin.

"Where Mr. Charley?" the Chinaman asked.

Pete Senta looked up. The men shook their heads. No one knew where Charley was or why he had not come in all afternoon. The Chinaman's face was sweaty as though the heat still hung outside. Then the metal door gave a soft clang as Sleigh let the Chinaman out. The men began to grow tired of waiting, the tray of food reminding their stomachs of supper, and soon they began to leave—soon the big place was deserted, only Frieda and Sleigh left behind, lifting the bowls of chow mein and preserved figs from the tray to the white-topped poker table, moving quietly among the barred windows and the chuck-o-luck wheels and the stale smoke.

Charley got off the train just as the clock in the depot tower was striking six. He saw the cool night settling down on the sidewalks earlier than usual. The trolley tracks

stretched down the hill toward the lake where the sandy beaches, after the heat of the day, gave off a smoky mist. He went down the side street where he had parked his Cadillac before he took the train down to Chicago early that morning. But before he left the station he looked carefully about. He might have been recognized. They might have known him by his black hat, or his stickpin, or the initialed Cadillac hidden down the street. He was well known in the city now, always meeting men he could not remember having seen before. But no one saw him, no one knew him, and leaving the station he went with his long lurching stride through the piling cold.

He was glad to be back. No one would ever know he had been gone. This was the city in which he had spent most of his life, the avenue, the department stores, theaters, the rivers rushing through the city, the many iron bridges that leapt over the rivers, and in the distance the dead cupolas of the breweries, shut down by Prohibition. It was a rich time, the late 1920's, and the city was rich with new building, wild with growth and spending. It was the wildness he liked, the spending and winning and losing, and pulling the Cadillac away from the curb he thought how glad he was to be back, he might have been gone a year and was home again, on the streets he knew; it was that kind of feeling.

Though he came back a wiser, older man. Thinking of what he had learned in Chicago that afternoon made him turn his head curtly to look through the car window, searching for something to make his mind stop thinking. Suddenly the buildings and streets, the river, the dead breweries were not enough. He took a bottle of prewar whisky from the side car pocket, steering with only one hand. He always drove too fast. The drink tasted raw and made his eyes

brim over. He pushed the cork back in and shoved his hat back on his head.

He could not decide where to go. He did not want to go to the gambling place, the big place that was his now, the kind he had wanted to run all his life. He wanted first of all to go home and change his clothes—the silk monogrammed shirt, the expensive suit, which felt unclean, not with grime or dust but with something else, something he did not want to think of but which now would always be there. He could feel it on his hands and taste it in his mouth, what he had learned that afternoon. He looked in the windshield mirror; but his face was not changed. He laughed softly, because he had thought it would be. Then a sudden panic in the pit of his stomach made him reach for the bottle again.

He wanted to go home. He wanted to be with Lon. But he could not face her—whatever it was between them, her docile acceptance or knowing what made him strong, knowing his needs, he still could not go to her now. He might give himself away, something might leap too suddenly into the hollowness inside him, the way it was doing now, making him grip the wheel tighter and laugh quietly, trying to think of some crazy reason why it might not be true. He shook his head. It was true. He blew his nose and knew he could not face Lon again until he was more used to it himself.

The wind blowing down the street hummed over the purr of the engine. He passed the buildings where his son Paul went to college—learning words, sounds, phrases he could never understand—and turned left over one of the many bridges. The tires made a licking sound on the asphalt of the bridge, aching against his eardrums. Along the river the buildings, granaries and warehouses, leaned toward the water. On other bridges to right and left the blue and red

lights were already shining. The gulls flew in the wakes of barges.

Lon was good. She must never be hurt by what he had learned in Chicago. Everything she did, she did for him—all the things that were habit now, like the monograms she stitched painstakingly on his silk shirts, though he could afford the best shirts with the best monograms embroidered on them. All through the years she had not complained, though her nights were like a widow's while he lived through the long nights downtown with chips and smoke and the whirring of cards.

Crossing the bridge, he parked the Cadillac and walked back to the river—it was new tonight, as it had been one night years ago. He looked at it as if he had never seen it before. He could not stop thinking of Lon, swearing again he would never let her know. Whatever came now, he must see alone to the end. The end itself would be enough bitterness for her. Christ, Lon, he thought, it shouldn't be. I could stand it if only I thought you could stand it.

Night after night she waited alone, afraid to sleep. When he came home in the morning she opened her eyes in awe—even after so many years, she was surprised to see him home safe. Only then, with him in bed beside her, could she sleep in peace; though an hour later she was up, dressing quietly, moving in silence out to the kitchen of the big white house he had bought for her. Only an hour's sound sleep, with him beside her, the thin dawn pushing under the window shades. But it was enough for her. He wanted servants but she refused and tiptoed around her spotless large kitchen to fix breakfast for Paul before he left for the college downtown, content with her world in the white house at the city's edge, Charley and Paul and herself, while he slept exhaustedly in his own world of dice and losses and big

killings. She was grateful just to have him home, and resting.

He stood on the bridge thinking these things about Lon, though he knew that at the gambling place they would be wondering what had become of him. The evening light, slanting over the city, dropped into the water. Several times he left the railing to start back to the car, glancing absently at the traffic over the bridge, but each time returned to look again into the tarnished water.

The September evening, swiftly growing cooler, ran with little ripples along the river surface. He stood there, knowing he ought to be at the gambling place, that soon the night crowd would be coming in, and instead let his mind flow backwards with the quick easy flow of the river, remembering a similar night years ago when he had stood on this bridge, wanting to go home to Lon but unable to make himself go—on a night years ago before he had become a big gambler, the night his son Paul was born.

In the big place, Frieda stacked the chow mein bowls with their faint green design of lotus on the tray. No one knew why they called him Frieda since his name was Sol Friedman. They called him Frieda perhaps because of his flat matronly face, or his way of shuffling around in carpet slippers, like a woman trying to be comfortable instead of a man. His body stuck out everywhere, over his belt, over his collar, over his shoes, but he was kindly and worked for Charley with a lazy patience. He could eat more than anyone had ever seen and Sleigh saved all his preserved figs for him, pushing the bowl across the poker table and watching peacefully while he dropped the crushed wet fruits into his mouth. His rabbinical stubble of hair, his broad nose and his bright ferret's eyes all worked together while he chewed.

Sleigh picked up a piece of string from the floor and tied it to the electric fan, because it looked pretty blowing in the wind. The fan was always going, summer or winter, churning the stale air, coiling the blue smoke around its blades. Frieda covered the tray of dishes with a napkin. They were alone in the gambling place, alone with the wheels and tables and empty chairs. There was nothing in the place to tell of the night to come, only the silence since the rummy players had gone. Sleigh went up to his small room on the second floor to change his blue necktie for a green one and to put on a clean white jacket before the night crowd came in. He was a tall Negro and proud of the snowy jackets he wore, proud to be working for someone like Charley and of having a friend like Frieda.

Before he returned downstairs Sleigh touched the photograph hanging over his bed. He touched it every night for luck, not so much for himself as for Charley, his boss, and touched it tonight with his fingers crossed, a thin perspiration breaking along his upper lip, because he had almost forgotten and was halfway out of the room when he remembered to turn back. The photograph had been taken two years ago, on the night Charley won all the money that had made the big place possible, the big rooms downstairs, the monogrammed chips and the snowy jackets for Sleigh.

A group of men stood in a semi-circle in the photograph—Pete Senta, rabbinical Frieda, big Maggioni, Rob with the frightened grin, Titanic and little Bergson. Charley was seated in their midst, a deck of cards in one hand, a pair of dice in the other, a hundred dollar bill twisted into a flower shape and stuck into his lapel, and on a stool in front of him a stack of bills, silver dollars, I.O.U.'s. The men wore their hats tipped back on their heads, their shirt sleeves rolled and cigarettes clinging in their fingers. Al-

ready the picture had an ancient air. It might have been taken dozens of years ago, the clothes looked outmoded, the print was yellowing, it was a long time ago, their faces looked younger than reality and spoke of good times. One of the men was holding a whisky bottle, another a fan of cards to show a royal flush. It was the night Charley stripped clean the three strangers from Omaha; the night he held the royal flush; the night when all the years of his life were answered. Across the photograph was printed HORSESHOE CHARLEY CAN'T BE BEAT and beneath it the signatures of all the men, ungoverned like the scrawls of boys, *Go get 'em, Horseshoe—Titanic . . . Give me some, Charley? Pete Senta . . . Nice Going, Friend—Joe Maggioni . . . Yours sincerely, Frieda. . . .*

Sleigh returned downstairs, where Frieda moved in his carpet slippers out toward the hallway with the tray of dishes. His haunches moved sleepily, straining the seams of his trousers, and a stain of juice from the figs was on his white shirt. Sleigh brought down a box of punchboard candy with him, with all the best pieces that he had saved for Frieda, and put it on the table beneath the bright light.

Frieda returned and began to eat the candy. Sleigh watched happily. Frieda had put all his savings into a diamond ring that he wore on his little finger and to Sleigh it was a beautiful sight to watch, the glittering stone moving up and down from the candy box to Frieda's mouth.

They began to wait again, though they knew nothing of the long night ahead or how they would be looking at one another with the blank, puzzled faces of mutes in tomorrow's dawn. Sleigh stooped to pick up the piece of string that had blown loose from the fan and Frieda played through a game of solitaire before he lowered his head on the table to rest his eyes. Sleigh sat next to him, waving off the flies as they buzzed near Frieda's head. He was happy

to watch over Frieda. They kept waiting. For they knew that soon the night crowd would come in. The big place would be alive again with the rattle of chips and the slapping of cards, the smoke wreathing blue in the pyramids of light that dumped from the hanging lamps to the tables, drifting out to the darkness above, and the impatient faces, the lines of sweat on Magglioni's fat forehead, the cries from the poker table—"Raise! . . . well, razoo you, you bastard . . . *raise again!* . . . a nine I want, come nine, nine, nine . . . oh a Goddamned deuce! . . . raise, razoo again, raise you! . . ." and the voice of the raker at the crap table—"Well, boys, will she come, will she won't? . . . there you are, *five's* the gentleman's number . . . will she do, will she don't? . . . there you are, the gentleman fades . . . *next man's dice if you please!* . . ." and Pete Senta's young voice sly and glib at the roulette wheel, and the blackjack games and the table stakes games, and the crinkling of paper bills, the clink of coin, and the hunched shoulders of the men sitting at the poker tables, stooping forward to avoid the drafts that ceaselessly blew through a crack in one of the windows.

Around seven o'clock Pete Senta came back from supper. Frieda and Sleigh looked up from the table.

"Hasn't anybody seen Charley?" Pete asked. "Why doesn't nobody know where he is?"

"Nobody saw Charley," Sleigh said.

"Why hasn't anybody seen him?" Pete asked. "It's seven o'clock."

"Nobody saw him because he wasn't around," Frieda said.

"He wasn't here," Sleigh said, "he didn't come around all day."

"I telephoned his house but he wasn't there," Pete said.

"I hope I didn't scare Lon, because she didn't know either where he was."

"That Charley," Sleigh said, "he'll kill you if you scared Mrs. Charley."

"Lon said he was down here at the place. She said he left around noon like always."

"That Charley's going to kill you for scaring Mrs. Charley," Sleigh said.

"I didn't scare her," Pete said. "I only asked where he was."

"He wasn't here," Frieda said. "I didn't see him all day."

"He's playing golf," Sleigh said happily. "He and Titanic, they went to play golf."

"Charley's never played golf in the afternoon all his life," Pete said. "He only plays in the early morning after work. Before he sleeps."

"He could beat that Titanic, easy," Sleigh said.

"Titanic isn't so good," Frieda said.

"He isn't playing golf with Titanic," Pete said. "I just saw Titanic having a drink with Sarah Johnston."

"Charley could beat him," Sleigh said.

"You shouldn't have scared Lon," Frieda said. "Now she'll keep worrying."

"I didn't scare her!" Pete said, and looked ready to cry. It worried him that he might have scared Lon, because he knew how Charley treated her like something sacred and far above all of them. Pete was young, less than twenty-five. Like all the others he loved Charley. All the gamblers, though they did not know what it was, loved Charley as something honorable and decent and right, though they did not know it in words. He was something better. They did not know better than what; simply better.

Frieda went to take the green felt cover from the roulette wheel and brought out the ivory roulette balls and croupier's

rake from the office. Pete followed him, worrying about having scared Lon, the dark eyes following dumbly after Frieda.

He smoothed his hand over his sleek black hair. "I wish I knew where Charley was, that's all," he said. He poked his fingers into his pack of cigarettes, dropping the pack to the floor when he found it empty.

Sleigh quickly picked up the empty cigarette pack, tearing off the coupon and putting it in his jacket pocket. He always saved the coupons for Frieda, who collected them, and often in an evening could find fifteen or twenty to give to him when they breakfasted in the morning before going to bed. "He's gone fishing," Sleigh said, beginning to laugh. It pleased him to think of Charley fishing. "Wait till he brings back them big ones. We eat fish tomorrow morning for breakfast."

"He didn't go fishing," Frieda said, shuffling comfortably out to the roulette wheel with the croupier's rake in his hand.

"Sure. Wait till he brings them big ones back," Sleigh grinned.

"He didn't go fishing," Pete said, "but I'd like to know where he went."

Sleigh looked hurt because they didn't think he had gone fishing.

"You'll find out where he went when he hears how you scared Lon," Frieda said.

"I wouldn't have scared her for anything," Pete scowled. "Charley knows that."

He went to the cigarette machine for a fresh pack of cigarettes, and Sleigh watched to see whether the machine would work or get stuck and then smiled as the pack dropped out. He waited until Pete tore the wrapper off, dropping it to the floor, and then picked it up to keep the

place looking clean. Little by little the place was growing alive as Frieda uncovered the tables and wheels, switching on all of the green-shaded lights and wiping the croupier's rake with his soiled handkerchief. Pete lit a cigarette and stood looking into the electric fan. Frieda's fleshy body moved about comfortably.

"Did any of you gentlemen ever happen to see an Arab?" Sleigh suddenly asked.

"No," Frieda said.

For all the electric fan's stiff breeze, it did not move one hair on Pete's sleek head. "No."

"That would certainly be something to see. I never saw one," Sleigh said. "A real Arab. I know someone who knew one."

"A real Arab?" Frieda asked.

Sleigh nodded. "I'd sure like to see that sometime," he said.

"There's plenty things no one's seen yet," Frieda said.

Sleigh nodded again, happy that Frieda thought so. "I'll bet an Arab looks something like you," Sleigh said to Pete. "They got black hair and black eyes."

"I'm part Spaniard," Pete said. "I wonder where Charley is." He threw his cigarette to the floor. "It bothers me."

CHAPTER TWO

THOUGH he knew he at least ought to telephone Pete Senta or Frieda at the gambling place, to let them know where he was, Charley remained standing on the bridge, thinking of the similar night almost twenty years ago when he could not go home—the night his son Paul was born.

It had frightened Charley that Lon was bearing his child—he worried for Lon. This was the city to which he had escaped from the farm at Beaver Dam just a few years before, a young man with a million-dollar dream. Here he had found his wife—every sight in the city was one he loved, the parks and museums, where the wise people went to look at things, the hotels where the travelers came with their luggage, the rivers and churches, the theaters where people laughed loudly, but on that night while Lon was in labor he could not make himself go home to her; and in all the city he could find no other place to go. As he walked down street after street a melancholy whistling followed him, from boys on corners, hidden on side streets, in doorways, whistling the quiet melodies they like to think up on cool autumn nights.

Charley was only a bartender then in Jake Johnston's saloon. He was in his twenties. He had Tuesday nights off and kept wishing Lon had not picked his night off to have their child. It left him with nothing to keep him busy and he kept thinking of Lon in pain. The pains began while they were having supper, just as he had gone to the wooden ice-

box in the rear hallway to get a bottle of beer. Lon looked at him as though she were doing something wrong. She looked pale but calm, and kept a faint smile on her lips.

"Are you scared?" Charley asked. "Are you all right?" But he did not know what to do, and stood dumbly beside the table.

Lon shook her head, smiling bewilderedly.

"Are you sure you're all right?" Charley said. "You're not scared now?"

But she began to stack the dishes on the table as though nothing had happened—she was going away on a trip, and wanted to tidy up first. Then she leaned against the table, still smiling.

"What's the matter?" Charley asked. "Don't be scared, Lon. Lon!—"

"Get Mrs. Bronson from next door," Lon whispered.

The house suddenly became a women's house. Mrs. Bronson from next door came running over, her apron billowing in the wind—she too looked pregnant, but cheerful, so that Charley wondered why the moment should make the two women so happy. He ran to the corner drugstore to telephone the doctor and to Lon's sister Alice, and then walked slowly back, making himself take slow steps when he wanted to run, holding himself back, away from the house.

When he stood again before the frame cottage with its slanting porch and morning-glory vines that Lon had planted, he knew he could not go in. The house looked unlivd in. Everything happening in the house was something of which he could be no part. He was frightened but at the same time feverishly happy, knowing that what was happening was all part of the million-dollar dream, the big money and Lon and a child and someday a gambling place of his own and Lon and their child to be proud of him.

He went downtown to the Oakwood Club, not telling any of the other men of his child being born. He felt a quick joy the moment he stepped inside the club. And he heard that night for the first time about Sneller. The men, talking about Ben Sneller, gave off flecks of dry, clucking laughter. The club was a cheap backroom hole. The men at the fifty-cent-limit poker table sat astraddle their chairs or leaned their elbows on the table, glancing at one another in sly mistrust, listening to the clatter of the chips, the fall of the cards, making the kind of trancelike talk gamblers make in a hard game, like men in their sleep with horrible but wonderful dreams.

It was the kind of talk he loved most. There were the cries of "Raise! . . ." and "I'll raise you! . . ." and "Oh give me my card, give it to me—Razoo!" and "Well then I'll raise again, oh my God!"

"It's hot in here, for Christ's sake," they said, "they keep it hot enough in here. Hello, Charley. *Here's Charley!* I've got to get out of this pot. I can't stand it, I'm dropping out."

"You dropping out?"

"Sure. I'm out this hand."

"Then I'll raise again! . . ."

"Why, raise you—Razoo! . . ."

"What's the matter with you bastards, all you know how to say is Raise?"

"How many cards you want, Bergson?"

"I don't want any cards. These cards I got is fine. That's all I want. I'm fine with these cards."

"Oh Christ, Bergson's standing pat."

"Sure. I'm standing pat."

"How many cards you want, Doc?"

"I don't know. I'll have to think this thing over, if Berg-

son's got a pat hand. That changes matters. I don't know."

"It's going to take him all night. Get off the pot, Doc."

"I'm thinking. Please!"

"Oh God, it's going to take him all night! Can't someone make him hurry?"

"Now, please, I'm thinking!"

"He's got to start thinking now! Can't someone get him to stop?"

"I'll take three cards," the doctor said, after thinking.

"Oh God, he's only got a pair then, and he has to think!"

"Here you are, Doc. One, two, three."

"Well, what are you doing—who opened?"

"I opened. I'll pass."

"You can't make money that way! I'll bet a chip. You calling, Bergson?"

"Razoo! . . . Razoo! . . ." they cried, and "Oh Christ, now what'll I do? I'll call!" and "Raise you—Razoo! . . ." Charley began to laugh at the crazy betting and at little Bergson, crucified in the middle. The men looked unhappy, playing the game, the chips spitting from their fingers, wet thumbprints left on the cards. There was almost a hundred dollars in the pot. The blood was pounding in Charley's head, his hands itched to hold cards and chips. Bergson, who held the pat hand, was a little man, almost dwarfed, with a shriveled face and fingers growing sticky with fright as the two men kept raising him. He began to moan as he threw chip after chip into the pot. He looked like a child going to slaughter. His brown, warped face looked as though he were going to cry—it made all the men who were watching the game begin to laugh at his misery, at the sweat pouring down his cheeks. Still he would not drop out. The two men who were raising began to raise and raise again, not for the game's sake, not for money but for blood, just to watch little Bergson, to see how shriveled he could look, to see

how much sweat could pour out of him. Charley watched the chips pile up and felt his hands itch and his mouth go dry. He began to shudder, seeing all the money, and how they threw the chips into the pot as though they had no value.

Suddenly Bergson took his cards and with a short angry cry, like the sound of something injured, flung them across the room. It shocked all the men into silence, until slowly they broke into laughter, seeing so much fury in someone as little as Bergson. His twisted body was trembling as he walked away from the table. All the men liked Bergson, liked gambling with him but also liked to see how blind they could make his rage, how miserable he could grow over his love for cards. They laughed until he had left the club; then their laughter died. The two men stopped raising each other, finished the hand in silence as though something inside them had died. The doctor took in the pot and stacked all the chips in neat piles. But he did not seem glad he had won. He looked unsatisfied and ashamed.

"I'd like to sit in the game awhile," Charley said, going toward Bergson's seat.

The men could not see how his hands were trembling. They were glad to have him sit in the game with them. They watched with hungry, warning eyes while he bought chips with the money he had saved from his last two-weeks' pay to put toward Lon's doctor bill. The dealer riffled the cards, glanced up from under his green eyeshade, and began to deal. The cards slid softly across the table.

Then the magical talk began all over again.

"I'll tell you what. I'll open without looking at my hand!"

"I'll raise," Charley laughed.

"Now, wait a minute," the doctor said. "Wait a minute. I'll have to think this over."

"Raise—raise you! . . ."

"Why, you bastards, all right—Razoo!"

"Now, please," the doctor said, "let's play this scientifically. Let's not just throw our money away."

"I'm raising, Doc—you calling?"

"Now, please. I'm thinking."

"Raise! . . ."

"Now let me think this thing out—"

"*Razoo! . . . Razoo! . . .*"

"Please, gentlemen. Let's be reasonable. You're not a lot of Ben Snellers."

It was the first time the words about Sneller dropped out. "What about Ben Sneller?" and "I saw Ben Sneller last night!—" they said, with voices that snapped, then "You saw Ben Sneller? I thought he was dead. I'll raise. I'll need some more chips," and "Oh, for Christ's sake, can't you quit raising? I'll call!"

"I'll raise again," Charley said quietly, his fingers hot from the touch of the cards.

"All right, you bastards asked for it. Now. *Razoo!*"

Charley's ears burned from the cries of the men, his eyes ached over the chips piling up in the pot. "I'll raise," he said again.

"I'll call. You're crazy. You're all crazy. You hurt my ass. Who said he saw Ben Sneller?"

"I did," the doctor said. "I saw him last night, up at Rankin's house. He lost nine hundred in half an hour."

"Oh, Christ, that's a lot of money! I thought Ben Sneller was broke."

"He is. It's a fact. He paid last night with an I.O.U. Up at Rankin's house, nine hundred dollars. I was there. I saw it."

"Well, I could tell you something—Sneller can't ever come back. *Once you're down, you're down—*"

"It's a fact. After Sneller left, Rankin lit his cigar with the I.O.U. 'That's what it's worth,' Rankin said. 'That's what I think of Ben Sneller's I.O.U.!' I saw it. I was there."

*"Once you're down, you're down—*Sneller can't make a comeback now. When I think of Sneller a few years ago . . . oh Christ, I'll call!"

"Who's Ben Sneller?" Charley asked. From one to the other he looked, so that they laughed in disbelief.

"Who's Ben Sneller? For God's sake, did you hear him? 'Who's Ben Sneller!'"

The men laughed quietly.

"Sneller?" the doctor said. "I'll tell you. He came from Frisco and he never cheated once in his life."

"It's true. I've known him for years. He never once used crooked dice or marked a deck. He didn't need to. He had luck and nerve and—"

"Nerve? Jesus, he bet fifty thousand in a table stakes game on a single hand of stud."

"Did he win?" Charley asked.

"No. But after he lost it, he just got up and went into the other room and took a nap. That was down in Chicago."

"But by that time he was so rich he was driving three cars, all the same size and style. He kept the extra cars to accommodate all his friends. He liked big parties. He was crazy over picnics. But one car couldn't hold fifteen people so he kept three cars, all alike."

"He took all the girls from the Everleigh House into Marshall Field's one afternoon. He bought each girl a fur coat."

"But that night, the night of the big stud game, was the night his luck broke. You can go so far and then you can't go any farther. And once you're down, you're down—"

"That was five years ago, and last night at Rankin's house, he had to pay with an I.O.U."

"I'm surprised. I thought he was dead. He's the same as dead."

"Sure, he's dead—"

Charley listened, not to the men burying Sneller while he was still alive but to all the old voices of men like Sneller, betting one thousand, two thousand, five thousand dollars on a single card, to Sneller buying his cars, to Sneller ordering the coats from the clerk for the Everleigh girls. He kept playing along for another half hour in the fifty-cent game at the Oakwood Club, betting, winning, sometimes not even knowing he had won the pot until they told him to rake it in, but he could not stop thinking of Sneller.

Abruptly he threw down his cards. The other men were surprised when he cashed in his chips. He was laughing a kind of drunken laughter. He had won close to two hundred dollars without even knowing whether he was winning or losing. All he could think of was Sneller. He could be like Sneller someday. It was why he could not sit still any longer. He went toward the door. He knew he was going home and reached behind him to untie his bartender's apron, forgetting he was on his night off. He looked up sheepishly when he saw the doorman watching him. The doorman in his frayed shirt and dirty greenish suspenders grinned at him and asked "Hook 'em again, Bud?" and looked in surprise at the five-dollar bill Charley gave him when he opened the door, as though he were already as big as Ben Sneller had been.

Outside the Oakwood Club the streets were empty, only the trolley rails shining down toward the river and the bridges. Charley felt good about having given the doorman the five-dollar tip. He felt like singing, and at the same time was sick from the trembling that shook his body. His

footsteps clacked about him as he walked, his coat collar turned up, beginning to think again about Lon and knowing he ought to go home, wanting to go and yet unable to make himself go. He knew it was too soon for the child to be born; he knew there still was nothing but pain and secrecy in the house. He would not be able to go inside once he got home—or if he got inside, knew he would want to hold her in his arms, making her promise that it was not hurting and that she did not blame him and that she was glad of their child being born in pain that was only hers, that he could not share.

The bright-lighted shop windows along the avenue, with nobody to look at the ghostly dummies standing inside wearing fur coats, the kind Ben Sneller had bought for the Everleigh girls, the shirtwaists and skirts, the big feathered hats, made the streets seem more desolate—all the dummies in their trim clothes looking through the plate-glass windows at nothing but the September wind blowing down the street. Haunted by the dummies, he got the feeling of being watched from behind. He felt what he had felt years ago on his father's farm, the emptiness of the night woods and silence of the pastures.

On his father's farm was a spring that had been running for years longer than anyone could remember—a slow cool trickle, clear in the sunlight. He longed suddenly to see the spring, the horses on hot, stuporous days lifting their dripping manes from the trough, like old men who wet their beards when they drank, fixing him with slumbrous eyes as he waited to lead them back to the fields. Almost the fields and groves had buried him, until his restlessness one day made him pack his bag, waiting until nightfall for a last glimpse of his mother as she came up from the barn toward the white house with its lightning rods, then riding

his bicycle all the way to the city, to the steeples, bridges, lights, traffic that he loved, all the buildings, hotels, cafés.

But tonight there was no place he wanted to go in the city. Only the farm, to which he could not return, seemed safe and sheltering. He dug his hands into his pockets and grew more calm as his fingers encircled the roll of bills he had won. Lon would be pleased with the money—she would know why he could not be home now. It was past midnight. The theaters, as he walked past them, their lights flicked out a long time ago, had a vacancy about them as though no applause had rung inside them for years. Lon liked the theaters—she liked to laugh at the comic acrobats and dance teams. He began to think of all the things she liked and whether he had let her enjoy them often enough, and then began to think of all the things he had not done for her—he did not stay home nights, he drank, he gambled, he was exactly as worthless as Lon's sister Alice kept saying he was. He was only a bartender. He did not have a respectable job. He let Lon go to church alone on Sundays, while he slept away the horrible fatigue from the nightlong debauch in the gambling places. But on his Tuesday nights off he took her to chop suey houses or in summer to the band concerts in the park, trying not to let her see how intolerably the loud music bored him. And sometimes they rowed on the park lagoon in late Sunday afternoons in the fall.

Tonight, no matter how he tried and sweated out his thoughts, he could not convince himself that he was good enough for her. Just before he left the house, while he stood waiting dumbly outside, he had heard a scream from Lon. It was what at last made him turn on his heels and hurry downtown—now the scream kept coming back to him. He thought he should have done something about it; something to make the pain less. He was certain suddenly that he was worthless, exactly what Alice said. A cheap

gambler. He remembered how often there was not enough money in the house—he recalled the horror of the one evening when he came home for supper, to learn Lon had walked all the way over to Alice's house, on a day when the streets were glassy with ice, to borrow money for meat for their supper. Charley had lost all his pay at the clubs on the night before. He remembered how he had raged at Lon for taking the money from Alice—not knowing it was his own shame, and his own helplessness, for he knew he would gamble again, that made him rage. What Lon did not know was how often, when he did not come home, he stayed at the gambling places or at Jake Johnston's, telling the other men about Lon—how she was too good for him, better than all of them put together. He was not articulate enough to describe her to the men, but the glow in his dark eyes described her—the men could tell what she was like. And what he did not know was how Lon—in spite of all his despair over himself when he began to brood—had already learned to forgive him all those things over which her love had to leap, the recklessness, his gambling, his aloofness at times; that Lon sensed all this and knew he must have these things, and that without them he would not be what she really loved most, no matter how much she suffered for his being what he was.

I'll fix it up with Lon, Charley thought; I'll even stop being a gambler. I'll go to church to make Lon proud in front of Alice and I'll save my money, I'll take it all home to Lon. I'll be good to you, Lon. He began to walk more quickly, sweating out his thoughts and fears, and when he saw the Palm Garden a block ahead hurried toward it—there would be something there, some life remaining, voices and sounds to blot out his loneliness and the sudden dread that he would never see her again. He stopped in front of a cigar-store window to turn down his collar and make

sure his shirt was clean—he was proud of his shirts that Lon made for him, fine shirts with stripes in them, always spotlessly clean. The shirt, pure and starched, was one she had been ironing for him that noon when he got out of bed. He shuddered and went with his light swinging step toward the Palm Garden.

It was a finer place than Jake Johnston's saloon where he tended bar. He never stopped marveling at the thousand shining silver dollars cemented into the floor, the heavy bronze chandeliers with crinkly glass shades, the hundreds of stiff palms in tubs, the rows of bright colored liqueurs behind the bar that the Palm Garden's customers drank, while at Jake Johnston's they only drank beer and shots of whisky. He stood at the bar, letting the splendor ease his taut muscles. He felt better in so rich a place. He liked himself better. He felt part of the fine bar. Only a handful of customers were left, a few lined against the polished bar, a group sitting far in the rear beside the deserted orchestra stand, drinking wine, an accordion player sitting halfway at their table and squeezing out the tunes they called to him. The bartenders were wiping up, stacking glasses in the metal basin, putting corks on bottles. He rubbed his toe over one of the silver dollars cemented in the floor but he did not glance down at it—without looking down, he could feel the round outline, the smooth worn surface. He had admired the bright wealth so often.

When he glanced down to the end of the bar, he knew at once at whom he was looking. With no reason to know, he knew. He began to tremble—he ordered another whisky quickly and tried not to look down toward the end of the bar, and tried himself to look rich, important, like a man who drove three cars and could shop for a dozen girls at Marshall Field's. He thought of the roll of bills in his pocket, as much as he earned in two months, and almost

felt the way he wanted to feel. But then he caught his face in the back-bar mirror and a pink flush crept along his cheeks—he didn't look like anything, no different than before. He looked like a bartender on his night off.

As often as he could, he let his eyes wander down toward the end of the bar. He paid for his whisky with a ten-dollar bill, though he had enough change in his pocket. There was a slow, aloof look creeping into his eyes. He glanced again down the bar. Ben Sneller, standing alone, was a small compact man with a head too big for his body. He seemed well dressed, until Charley noticed the worn elbows of his coat. His dark hair was clipped short like a convict's or foreigner's, his forehead was round but furrowed, his fingers were meshed like thin wires around his beer glass. There was so much foam lined around the half-empty glass that Charley knew it must be a free beer, the kind that is drawn all foam, without any real body of beer.

Sneller never shifted his black, hungry eyes from the mirror ahead of him. Save for the threadbare elbows, the piercing eyes, the blandness of his gaze, he did not seem like a gambler at all. Charley at last took courage and looked directly at Sneller. But his heart was pounding, just because he knew what Sneller had been, rich, lucky, powerful. As Charley watched him, Sneller turned toward him—for a moment Charley even thought he was going to speak; but then he let his gaze go on, beyond Charley; his eyes did not once lose their unwincing sheen and looked straight through him, through years, through centuries, until Charley thought he must be looking at all the dead men who had played for stakes, not caring how they lost or won.

Charley left the Palm Garden, not knowing where he wanted to go, hating the emptiness of the streets and the

mourning of the wind. The lights in the shopwindows still burned, all the dummies watching blankly as he walked down the cold street, his hands in his pockets, his head bent forward, all the more plagued and lonely now because he had seen Ben Sneller.

In his mind he did not see him as a gambler who was broke and out of luck. He did not see the threadbare elbow or the defeat. He saw him with his three cars and the girls, going on picnics, with big baskets of food and blankets to sit and lie on. He saw him going into the big clubs in Chicago, wearing silk shirts that were spotlessly clean, and everyone saying Look, there comes Ben Sneller. That's Ben Sneller, you know who he is. I saw Ben Sneller the other day out at the ball game, he bet a thousand dollars on the Cubs. I saw Ben Sneller the other day, his three cars filled with girls on their way to a picnic. I saw Ben Sneller tip the waiter at the Palmer House with a hundred-dollar bill.

I saw Ben Sneller, Charley kept thinking. A trolley ground by, making the empty avenue even more desolate. He saw two passengers sitting in the car, far apart, their faces tired, the eyes looking through the barred windows at nothing. Then in one of the store windows he saw a dress that he would have liked for Lon, but knew she would not like. He bought her a dress one time, the kind he would have liked to see her in, cut low and with lace at the throat, but she laughed when she held it up against her, four sizes too big. Anyway, she laughed, did he want her to look like one of Sarah Johnston's girls, and she exchanged it for a plain suit and a ten-dollar credit slip.

He turned quickly off the avenue, away from the shopwindows, starting down a side street until softly, distantly, he heard the humming of the river. Soon he was standing on the bridge. *I saw Ben Sneller, I knew him without being told.* The September night was dark, the wind blowing up

the river, hurrying the water under the bridge. On the bridge, hidden away from the avenue, the black night leapt at him, flew against the iron girders and into the water below. He was thinking of Lon again and their child. He knew that he ought to go home but it was not yet time—he saw Lon's eyes, patient and hurt. He was sweating, thinking about her labor, shaking with fear that something might have gone wrong. She was not big and the birth would tear her body, eat away her strength. He wished she had gone to a hospital, though she and her sister Alice both laughed at him when he suggested it, on the night Lon told him she was going to have the baby.

"A hospital?" Lon laughed, her eyes shining, "what for?"

"So they can take good care of you!"

"You'd never get me in a hospital—not until they're ready to bury me!" and Lon turned her laughing eyes to Alice, who shook her head with her dislike for Charley, doubly sure he was no good now, wanting to throw his money away on a hospital. It was like putting on airs.

But Charley was frantic about the baby Lon was going to have, and followed her around, watching her as though there were suddenly something strange and wonderful about her. He could not understand her calmness, as though nothing really wonderful had happened to them; he did not go downtown that night, and once they were in bed Lon could feel him lying tensely beside her—he wanted to touch her, but was afraid, and thought he might somehow harm the baby if he got too near. Then she took Charley in her arms. In the middle of the night she awoke and found him still sleeping there. Only he wasn't sleeping. She felt a tear roll from his face onto her body.

All through the months of waiting he argued about the hospital; but hospitals were for death, she said, not for birth. Or you were taken to a hospital after an accident, to

be patched up. And even for dying, you went to a hospital only when you were rich. But one's own bed, in one's own house, was where births took place, with water heating on the kerosene stove and the doctor's hat hung up neatly in the front hall. And you knew all along how to have babies, without nurses or internes—it was something you learned long before having one, from your mother perhaps, like learning to eat and talk.

With the money he had won at the Oakwood, he would pay the doctor in one lump. It would please Lon and make her proud—it gave you standing, to pay your bills all at once. It might make Alice change her mind about him. There would be enough left to buy a present for Lon. Suddenly he could not think of what men bought their wives for presents—something respectable and not like the dress he had bought for her. But all he could think of was the fur coats that Ben Sneller had bought for the girls at the Everleigh House, and all the expensive presents rich men could buy for their wives, cars, jewelry, coats and dresses. He was racking his brain to think of what he could buy for Lon when he turned his head and found Ben Sneller standing beside him on the bridge.

The strange part that Charley always remembered later was that they did not talk much. Sneller leaned his arms over the railing of the bridge, like a fellow traveler on a boat. He was hatless, his cropped hair grazed by the wind. He laughed occasionally, a quiet laugh that fell down to the water. Even in the dark, Charley could see the deep gloss in his eyes. He held a pair of dice between his fingers, rattling them absently, and at last let them fall into the river, as though something were over—he no longer had use for them.

But Charley felt no fear in standing next to the man who was once a big gambler and rich. He felt soothed, and

powerful because Sneller had followed him and come to stand beside him on the bridge. He felt taller, bigger, recognized, branded for life now as a gambler just because Sneller stood beside him, branded to become what Sneller had been. His blood rushed, despite his calm, at his certainty of himself. He was friends with Sneller. He was riding in the big cars, laughing with the Everleigh girls, making the rounds of the gambling places with Sneller and leaving hundred-dollar tips behind.

Later Charley could remember that from time to time Sneller talked, but he could not remember the words or their meaning. And he knew they stood together on the black bridge for half an hour. But he could recall nothing more, it might not have happened, he could not be certain that it had happened at all except for the thing that he held in his hand as he walked, a half hour later, alone from the bridge.

CHAPTER THREE

W HEN THE

telephone rang at the big place, Pete Senta and Frieda and Sleigh looked at each other to see who would answer it. At last Sleigh rubbed his dark hands against his snowy jacket to make sure he would not dirty the instrument, and went into the small office where the phone kept ringing and ringing. He was back in a moment and what he said made Pete Senta rush into the office.

Frieda had a bag of litchi nuts that the Chinaman had brought along with the supper tray. He cracked the paper-light shells of the nuts gently, putting the gummy nuts between his teeth. He chewed thoughtfully and tried to listen to Pete on the phone—all of them, when it rang, thought it might be Charley. It was seven-thirty. Any moment the night crowd would start coming in, but Charley was not yet back and they had grown tired guessing where he could be.

Pete thought the phone call might be from Charley or Lon, saying she had heard from him, like the night a year ago when Charley did not come down to the club, and long after midnight Lon called to say she had just found him, upstairs in his bed, sound asleep, exhausted, dead in his sleep so that she hated to wake him up.

But it was not Charley or Lon. Pete felt the heavy telephone grow moist in his hand. The receiver was a hot damp circle against his ear, like something intimate. He kept

nodding into the phone, as though he could be seen. It was the desk sergeant from the station calling.

"But he ain't here," Frieda heard Pete say again and again. "If I knew where he was, I could tell you. Nobody saw him all day."

Pete listened to the slow, unemotional, law-enforcing voice of the sergeant. The sergeant called Charley by his first name.

"But we ain't seen him," Pete kept saying. "Nobody saw him, not even his wife."

He listened tensely to be able to hear above the rattle of the paper bag as Frieda dug his big hand inside for nut after nut. When he returned to the room Sleigh was waiting beside Frieda, waiting for him to finish eating the nuts so he could sweep the thin, fragile shells from the floor.

"That was the desk sergeant at the station," Pete said.

"Hennessy?" Frieda asked.

"No. The other one, Harmon. He wants Charley to call him, the minute he gets to the club."

"He wants some more booze," Frieda said. "Another case."

"No," Pete said. "He says it's important."

"That's important," Frieda said. "You don't think a case of booze is important?"

Pete shook his head. The litchi nuts left a pale brown stain on Frieda's lips. Pete looked up toward the ceiling. "No, it was something else, something important. Charley shouldn't forget," he said, looking up at the ceiling as though he were writing the message there to remind himself, "I should tell him the minute he comes to the club. He's got to call Sergeant Harmon right away."

Sleigh was still picking up the brown paper-thin shells of the litchi nuts from the floor beside Frieda's chair when

the first of the nighttime crowd began to come in. Pete Senta saw them coming in and hurried over to Frieda.

His black eyebrows were raised and his face went white with worry. "Now what'll I do?" he whispered. "The crowd's coming in and Charley's not here!"

Frieda picked a fragment of gummy nut from his teeth and studied it lazily as it clung to his fingernail. His ferret's eyes were nearly lost in his fleshy face from studying the piece of nut. "I don't know where he is," Frieda said. "If I knew, I'd tell you. You could go look for him. Do you think maybe I'm hiding him?"

The bit of nut fell from Frieda's fingernail down to the floor and he looked around to see where Sleigh was, waiting for him to come and pick it up. It was hard work for Frieda to stoop, and when Sleigh did not come, busy with the customers at the door, he brushed it with his carpet-slippered feet under the table and shrugged his shoulders, looking up at Pete.

But Pete was gone. Frieda saw him across the room, brushing his hand over his sleek oily hair and going up to greet the customers who had just come in. He waited until Sleigh took their hats and then led them into the roulette room, the way Charley would do, talking to them and leading them into the ornate room with the marble fireplace at each end and gilt cornices around the ceiling, the room that used to be Sarah's reception room when Sarah Johnston owned the place, when it was one of the biggest and finest houses in the country with all the girls in Paris dresses and all the men either rich lumbermen or meat packers or famous people like boxers and ballplayers.

It was the big room where the rich gambled. There was a rosewood roulette wheel and heavy drapes over the blind windows and expensive chairs to sit on. Pete hated the rich, who did not know how to gamble, who gambled without

love, pinching their pennies; he hated them even though Charley kept telling him that was how they got rich, by pinching their pennies. But they did not know how to gamble. They talked the wrong way, without fright or passion, while the ball spun and struck and clack-clacked in the grooves of the wheel. They played like dead men clustered around the table. Pete hated the rich because they were rich and he was not and because he was a gambler and they were not. And because the daughters of the rich were beautiful, with the fine stretching bodies of good horses, and because the rich daughters would never look at a gambler like Pete except to buy more chips or to collect their winnings.

There was only one of the rich whom he liked, the brewer, J. Walter Kersten, one of the first of the night crowd to come in that evening, bringing with him not another rich man, but his barber, a small man with glasses named Joe Joseph. It was really his name, Mr. Joseph Joseph. They were friends, the rich brewer and his barber, one of the secret lonely friendships that form between men in gambling places or cat houses or at ball games, without rank or position. It was all right, Pete thought, it made Kersten good. Kersten was also friends with Charley and they often played billiards together. That was all right. It would be all right in the world if all the rich men made good friends with their barbers instead of with other rich men, Pete thought, taking them into the expensive room, and slowly his black slightly slanted eyes came alive as he went toward the wheel, picking up the ivory ball in his fingers and trying to act as slick as the room he was in.

Sleigh went out to the pantry to get glasses and whisky, good prewar whisky, and ice for Mr. J. Walter Kersten. The customers in the wheel room always got drinks set up free, the way it was done in the movies, the men with their

women moving around the roulette table in expensive clothes, holding highballs in their hands.

He mixed the highballs carefully and happily, squeezing the lemon and touching the peel to his lips before he threw it away. He liked to make Charley's place seem as fine and perfect as Charley liked it to be, as it had been when it was Sarah's House with the expensive girls and breakfast served on bed trays to customers in the morning, and a little crystal fountain tinkling in the reception room where the roulette wheel stood now. His eye caught a drop of whisky spilled on the floor and he slapped his foot on it as he would on a roach or ant.

Next to the sink in the pantry was a little window that Sleigh opened an inch to let in some air, before taking the highballs out to Mr. Kersten. He could see nothing through the window, because it was boarded over outside, but through the narrow slits between the boards he could see it had grown dark outside, a black blowing night, and still Charley was nowhere around. A little breeze pushed through the slits, cool, smoky with fall. Hey Charley, Sleigh thought, reminded by the burnt smell of the air, when are we going fishing? How many years you promise now, You bet your life, Sleigh, one of these days we'll take a week off and go up north in the woods for a little fishing?

We'll take Frieda along, Sleigh made him promise. He began to stir the highballs, thinking about it, about the north woods and lakes that he had never seen, about riding in a boat, which he had never yet done. How you going to catch them big fish, Sleigh thought, beginning to laugh—you watch out, that big fish step right inside the boat and bite your head off. You've never known anything like it, Sleigh, Charley told him, all of a sudden that big baby is on your line and you got to fight with him, and play the line loose but not too loose, else he'll dive down under

the water like lightning and snap your line, just like he cut it with a knife. Or if you let him play too long or let your line too loose he'll shoot down into the weeds or snag himself under a log and then you're a goner, so you got to watch that big sonofagun.

"I'll watch that big sonofagun," Sleigh said.

Little prickles of perspiration came on Sleigh's forehead, but it would be a wonderful thing to have happen, catching that big baby. We'll watch those big sonofaguns, Charley, you and Frieda and me, riding in that boat.

Sleigh put the drinks carefully on a tin tray and carried them in to J. Walter Kersten the brewer and his friend Joe Joseph the barber. He enjoyed serving the drinks, and liked to look at the room, the roulette table of polished rosewood that he himself kept richly polished, and the stacks of chips, and the quiet, tricky way Pete handled the croupier's rake, like something that took long years to learn. Sleigh nodded with enjoyment at the way he used the rake, darting it across the table to exactly the stack of chips he wanted to take and not even grazing the other chips, the ones he had to pay off because they were on the winning number. He went to find Frieda to talk to him about his enjoyment in watching Pete rake the chips in, but Frieda was nowhere around so Sleigh took up his post at the door, waiting for more customers to be let in and thinking soon, any minute now, Charley should be coming in.

Shortly after, only about two minutes later, Charley's brother Rob came in. No one particularly liked him and so no one noticed or spoke to him. He was as tall as Charley but thinner, with a way of letting his lower lip drop when he laughed. He was carrying a package of sodium bicarbonate and went into the bathroom to take a dose, forgetting

to turn off the water faucet when he left so that Sleigh had to slip in after him to turn it off.

He started toward the room in the back where the crap table was. Rob ran the crap game. He was not a good gambler and could not be trusted, stealing out of the cash-box each night while he raked. Charley figured he stole maybe a thousand a year—not much, but that again was like Rob. He stole in dribbles; he couldn't even steal big. Charley let him keep on working because they were brothers. It was hard to think of him as Charley's brother. They all knew how he stole from Charley. There was always a circle of emptiness around Rob as the men avoided him—he was like a doomed man that no one wanted to touch.

Rob belched as he went into the crap room. His hawk-like eyes were swinging wildly and the yellow pallor on his face was even more yellow than usual. He kept rubbing his hands with his handkerchief, but still the palms were wet. His mouth began to twitch at one corner and he dropped his handkerchief, picked it up and dropped it again. He found the box of dice and the croupier's rake that Frieda had set out for him. But he couldn't get the cashbox until Charley came in. His thin bony fingers took hold of the black cracked oilcloth covering the crap table and folded it, but not neatly, so that later Sleigh had to fold it over again to keep the cloth from getting even more cracked than it was.

There was no one in the crap room. He took out the dice and flung a trial roll down the table—the dice hit with a hard dull thud against the board. He flinched at the sound, as though it startled him, and flung his eyes around him again, though he was looking for no one, he expected no one to be in the room with him. His pale hands were trembling. The cones of light falling from the lamps lit up the bright green sea of the crap table. The bright light in

the empty room made Rob seem a lonely man, but he would never have known it since he was used to being always alone. He lived in a cheap hotel, in spite of all the money he stole, a dingy room with a washbasin hung against the wall but no toilet or tub. He never knew there were better or cleaner places to live.

His eyes shifted wildly across the table and the betting numbers painted on its green felt top. He blew his nose and swung his eyes around the empty room. Frieda had been in the crap room, but went out as soon as Rob came in. It never occurred to Rob that no one liked him or wanted to be around him or that Charley knew how much he stole. He thought everything was all right, since he was Charley's brother. He threw the croupier's rake clumsily across the table. He was trembling, and mopped his chin with his handkerchief. He looked scared to death about something. He laughed suddenly, an ugly, nervous spurt of laughter. Then the room seemed even emptier.

"Well, I'm ready," Rob said to no one.

CHAPTER FOUR

ALL DURING

the night when Charley's son was being born, the wind kept blowing down the avenue. Charley turned up his collar as he left the bridge, not looking back to see whether Sneller was still standing there. He walked slowly until he came to an all-night café.

The girl in the café brought him a thick cup of coffee. He swore that as soon as he had drunk it he was going home. He had grown chilly, standing on the bridge with Sneller. It was growing light. Then the wind died away. He could see down the street from the table at which he sat, and watched the dawnlight suck the strength of the lights in the store windows. The dummies looked out wearily through their round blank eyes.

He wondered whether he had enough money left to pay for his coffee and the trolley ride home. He reached into his pocket, bringing out a handful of change and the diamond stickpin. Then he wondered how he could tell Lon that he had no money, nothing but a diamond stickpin, not even the money he had saved out of his two-weeks' pay to put toward the doctor bill. All he could think to tell her was that Sneller was an honest gambler, that Sneller never once used crooked dice or a marked deck, that he paid back his debts. They were the only things he could think of to say to persuade her that he was not the wastrel that Alice would tell her he was.

But he knew he could never tell Lon anything about

Sneller. He knew how her eyes could question him, wanting to understand but unable to hold the tears back. He ran his fingers through his hair. There was no way to tell Lon that he had handed over his bankroll, the money he had saved and the money he had won that night at the Oakwood—handed it to Sneller on the bridge, simply because Sneller had asked him for it, handing him the stickpin in return for safekeeping. Charley had given him the money even though he knew about the nine hundred dollar I.O.U. from the night before that Rankin had used to light his cigar. And there was no way to tell Lon, no way to ask her forgiveness.

His coffee grew cold. He kept telling himself to go home. He watched a group of men pushing through the doorway without recognizing them at first as the men he had played poker with at the Oakwood Club earlier that evening—he was surprised to see them, the game ending at such an early hour when it usually lasted until seven or eight in the morning. He saw their faces crossed with disbelief and confusion. All the talk that he loved fell from their lips as they pushed around his table, all the hot blistering words.

Such a night!—I tell you, such a fine thing to see! Such a night, like nothing that's happened in the world before! Christ, what a night! They panted, all talking at once about what they had seen that night. The doctor who had been in the poker game sat beside him, leaning one arm on the back of his chair. "Just listen to this, Charley," the doctor said, "you've never heard anything like it before."

"Seven thousand dollars in fifteen minutes!" The men rocked their heads with disbelieving laughter. "Seven thousand dollars! I never saw it happen before—" The men snorted, their faces flushed with wonder.

"It's the truth," the doctor said. "I saw it. I was there. Last night he was a dead dog. Up at Rankin's house he had

to pay with an I.O.U." He turned to Charley. "Ben Sneller came into the Oakwood—"

"Sneller?—I saw Ben Sneller."

"He came into the Oakwood with a little money," the doctor said, running his tongue along his lips, "and in less than a quarter of an hour won seven thousand dollars shooting craps."

Charley sat listening to the men all talking at once. "I saw Sneller—" he said again and again, but the men would not listen, all talking together.

"He had this look in his eye—I saw it when he came in. I saw this look and I poked Goldberg. I told him 'Look, here comes Sneller with a funny look in his eye—' "

"Seven thousand dollars in fifteen minutes, oh God."

The doctor smiled and let cigar smoke drift upward from his lips into the aching eyes of the waitress as she brought them their coffee. "The thing is, Sneller killed himself—"

"He shot himself, Christ, would you believe it?"

The men gave out soft wails of laughter. "Jack, the doorman, comes running in from the hallway. 'God-almighty, fellas, he shot himself!—' "

"'God-almighty, fellas, he's gone and shot himself in the head'—it's what Jack, the doorman, came in shouting," the doctor said, retelling it correctly. "He killed himself, would you believe it, as he left the club. Yessir, Sneller was a dead man before he walked in there tonight—once you're down, you're down. There was no saving Ben Sneller."

Oh God once you're down, you're down!

"Seven thousand winner?" Charley asked.

"Seven thousand! Seven thousand winner?—broke! He died flat broke! I saw the look in his eyes—"

The doctor touched the napkin to his lips. "Just as I said, he was a dead man when he came in there tonight.

He won seven thousand dollars in the crap game, took it over to the poker table, no-limit game, and lost it in one hand to Harry Kellman. In one deal of five-card stud—I saw it!”

The café bristled with the harsh, confused, startled laughter of the men.

Charley walked with his long stride in the dawnlight from the trolley down the two blocks toward home. All the houses, one like the other, had their shades drawn; a few were already topped with plumes of smoke from kitchen stoves. He pinned the diamond stickpin inside his vest where Lon would not see it and began to run the last half block home.

The frame house was small and narrow. The paint hung in peelings, like the dried rind of fruit, from the outside walls. He trembled as he put the key in the lock. In the parlor a small kerosene lamp was burning, and the room was faintly fragrant with the warm kerosene oil. He yanked his necktie loose, ran his fingers through his hair, and simply stood in the middle of the parlor, not knowing what to do. He was frightened by the stillness of the house—as though no one lived there any longer. Then he saw the doctor's hat, still hanging in the front hall. It made his heart pound. He was sure something had gone wrong.

Lon's sister Alice heard him and came into the parlor, her eyes half shut with sleepiness but with little excited marks of red on her pallid cheeks. Then all at once he knew that Lon was all right. Alice brought him a cup of coffee with grounds spilled down the side of the cup, smiling at Charley though he knew she did not like him. Her tall thin body looked aching. She seemed herself to have borne the child.

“Is Lon all right?” he asked.

"Why wouldn't she be all right?" Alice said. She took a handkerchief from her pocket and with a corner tried to wipe the sleep out of her eyes. "She had good care."

But when she told him he could not see Lon yet, all the life drained out of him. It seemed unfair that husbands were so shut away from births. They were shut outside, like something incompetent or too weak to see the convulsive birth. He sat by the window, reaching over to the table to turn down the wick of the lamp. He watched the full dawn-light devour everything in the room, even the feeble flame he had left in the lamp—it shone white and colorless. He took out a deck of cards and tried to play solitaire while he was waiting; he knew what Alice was thinking, that he might have stayed home while his child was being born, even though they would have kept him locked away from Lon. Then he took out the diamond stickpin from inside his vest and dropped it among the cards. He could not finish the game of solitaire and sat looking at the glittering pin dropped beside the rumpled deck.

Alice came back into the parlor and he felt all the life pour violently back inside him. She went to the parlor clock and squinted closely, to see exactly what time it was. She concentrated hard to remember it.

"A boy," Alice said.

"Thank you," Charley whispered. He believed that somehow she had made Lon come through it all right.

He went into the small bedroom. The room was chilly and smelled unfamiliar. Lon had her eyes shut but when he tiptoed into the room she opened them, looking at him with a look that said she wanted to laugh but was too tired. He felt strange in the room, not knowing what to do. The dawnlight, ripening to the hard sunny glare of September, came through the bedroom window and lit up her bare arms, the tired, ashen face, her long light-colored hair tan-

gling over the pillow. She was too exhausted to speak, but opened and shut her soft, warm hand, motioning for him to take hold of it. He was surprised, when he touched her hand, how the flesh burned and how quickly she gripped him, shutting her eyes for a second as though she had waited all through the night for this.

"Was it bad?" he asked.

She shook her head, again with the look of wanting to laugh if she were not so tired. Her lips were sore and chapped, her eyes had a humble, appalled look. The little feverish veins crossing on her eyelids were only proof of her love for him—her joy in giving him his child. But she was so tired.

"I'll stay home now. Every night. Don't you worry," Charley whispered.

She looked at him with her sore mute smile, expecting not even that much of him.

Then he was even more ashamed, because she was willing only to suffer for him, so long as he would take her love. He tiptoed from the bedroom, staggering slightly from trying to walk so cautiously, and went into the pantry off the kitchen to find a shot of whisky. He saw that Alice had put out a breakfast plate for him at the table; the house was tidied and Alice was gone. He grew frightened, wondering who would take care of the child and what he would do if Lon wanted something or needed help. He poured out a second glass of whisky and carried it into the bedroom, the rim of liquor springing in a thin wave over the edge of the glass from his shaking hand.

Again Lon's eyes were closed.

"Sleeping?" Charley asked.

She shook her head, and it made him think she was never going to speak again. But a moment later she opened her eyes, looking up at him. He put one arm under her head

to raise her up as gently as he could, and touched the glass to her lips. She drank the whisky with the slightest grimace—a grimace that might have distorted her face much more were she not so tired.

“It’s good for you, Lon,” he said. But he still was worried, because Alice was gone and there was no one there to take care of the child, or of Lon if she needed help. He went to the crib, close to Lon’s bed, and remembered he had not yet even looked at his son. He sat down beside it, glanced at the child and then glanced back to Lon, no muscle moving in his face. He looked dazed, more tired than Lon. A moment later, when he heard someone out in the kitchen, he tiptoed outside to find Mrs. Bronson from next door washing the breakfast plate he had not even touched.

He returned to Lon. “Mrs. Bronson’s here,” he said, feeling he gave her important news.

Lon nodded. He could see how tired she was, how she longed for sleep. For a moment he nearly grinned at her but then knelt on the floor beside the bed and threw his arm over her full strong breasts, and began to sob fiercely.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE CROWD was coming and kept Sleigh busy unlocking the door. But he did not let anyone in unless he was sure it was someone that Charley knew or would want in the place. At about eight o'clock he lifted the lid over the peephole and saw a poorly dressed man he had never seen before—only once before, that was, that afternoon when the same stranger had come, asking for Charley King. Sleigh had sent him away and when he saw him again tonight, shook his head, and grinned, and sent him away again. It made him feel good, taking such care of Charley's place.

But the customers that he recognized, he let in gladly. The place was filling up. Pete Senta came from the front room where the rich men played roulette, the look of worry in his black eyes because the place was growing so crowded. He went to the office and poured himself a shot of prewar whisky. The crap room also was filling up. He went to look for Frieda.

"Where's Charley?" he asked. "It's after eight o'clock. I can't figure out where he is."

Frieda was at the water cooler, drinking cupful after cupful of water. He shrugged his heavy shoulders. "Nobody's seen him yet. I told you before, I didn't see him all day."

"I can't figure out where he'd be," Pete said. "I can't see why he'd stay away all day and not even tell Lon where he was."

Just then Sleigh opened the metal door again and Charley

came in. Sleigh was laughing, pleased to see Charley. Pete saw the tired pouches under Charley's eyes and the deep-cut lines beside them that he had not noticed before.

"For Christ's sake, Charley, where were you?" Pete asked. He followed Charley toward the office.

For a moment Charley looked at Pete. He was about to tell him something. But he stopped.

"I wasn't anywhere," he said.

Part Two: THE LONG NIGHT

CHAPTER ONE

THE NEW thing about Charley that night, they all thought, was the silence about him. Wherever he had been all day, he did not tell them. After Sleigh opened the thick metal door for him he went directly into his office. The place kept growing more crowded, the rich paunchy men filling the roulette room and the hopeful poor men with their week's salary in their pockets clustered around the crap table in back. The smoke hung suspended from room to room, twining among the men, curling through the bristling stillness of men who are gambling, of men who look tense, pale, sick, like men being tried for their lives, who know they are doomed yet hold hope flickering in their eyes. Charley knew the look of these men, the glimmer of hope, somewhat ashamed, a whole world at stake while the men's fingers, their laughter, words, gestures, tried to make it seem it was nothing at all, it was only money, an evening's pastime, they did not care which way the dice rolled or how the cards fell; it was only sport, the men shamefacedly tried to pretend, instead of the lust and hatred and blood that it was.

Sleigh was happy, carrying highball glasses back and forth from the roulette room. Joe Joseph the barber, nervously putting fifty cents on a number, had won eighteen dollars and his soft unbelieving laughter as he collected the chips from Pete Senta made all the men glad he had won. He might have beaten some insuperable odds, their pleased faces

said—it was not the house or Charley he had beaten but something outside that was against them all, against even Charley. The mortal Joe Joseph, barber, had outsmarted some terrible thing against which all the men endlessly struggled, and even Pete Senta felt glad, pushing the chips toward him, a little sum but a big one for Joe Joseph to win. The lights from the hanging lamps blinded the lenses of his glasses but his lips were smiling, as he turned to his friend J. Walter Kersten, fingering all the chips he had won. For that moment it was not Charley's gambling place, and all of them, Charley, Pete, Frieda, Sleigh, the rich or poor customers, were in league behind Joe Joseph who had fought with and conquered a demon.

Sleigh looked into the office to tell Charley about the barber's shy joy at winning the eighteen dollars, as though he had won a thousand. Charley laughed, taking a highball from Sleigh's tray. A ring of moisture was left on the tray where the drink had stood, and Sleigh set the tray down carefully, taking a cloth from his pocket and wiping its surface to keep it looking neat.

"You don't look so good," Sleigh said, stuffing the cloth back into his pocket. "You want to be careful. You got the sick look on your face."

Charley turned to him with a look of surprise, his dark eyebrows twisting upward. Then he looked away and slowly finished his drink. He was heavier now, gaining weight in spite of all the nights spent in the smoke-filled club. His eyes still were warm. His shock of black hair, as he ran his fingers through it, felt alive.

But it was not these things Sleigh saw, but the look of sleep that had come in his eyes and mouth and fingers, and even hung in his tired laugh. "You don't look good to me," Sleigh said. "You get some rest." He began to look happy. "You close up this place for awhile."

"Close up the place?" Charley laughed.

"We go up to them lakes up north," Sleigh grinned, and sounded ready to start. "We catch them big sonofaguns. We take Frieda along."

"Sure, we'll just close up and go fishing," Charley said, but wishing he could.

"Up north," Sleigh said, "all those big babies are waiting. I won't rock the boat."

"I'll just close up," Charley said.

Sleigh wiped his forehead. "Just lock the door and off we go, but we got to take Frieda along!"

"Sure," Charley said. But he would have liked it.

"I'll be careful," Sleigh said. "Those big sonofaguns, they pull you right in the lake."

"Sure," Charley said. "Watch out."

"This is good fishing weather, I bet," Sleigh said. "We'll get those big ones."

"It's good fishing weather, you bet your life."

Charley got up and went to the window. The boarded window made the room like a cell, but he stared through the pane. He could see where there was nothing to see, the rattling pines and icy-gray waves licking among the bulrushes.

"You couldn't find better weather. You're right, Sleigh," he said, "by God it would be something."

He laughed, knowing it was only a wish, but thinking how he would like the feel of it, the late afternoons on a lake up north, a blue haze sinking down from the sky like a veil for him to drift through. He would keep close to shore, *wishing* his way through the bays of lead-green bulrushes and wild rice, the year's grain still in its husks and a soft deathlike rattle rising as the boat nosed against the pods. He was alone on the lake, not with Sleigh or Frieda—he did not know why but he saw himself alone.

The plop of his minnow hitting the water after a long cast echoed around him, then the larger growing rings of water spreading until they sucked against the boat and gently rocked him. His blood beat with the whir-r-r of his reel as he wound in, his hands icy from the mist that sprayed from the line, at last the quick, ecstatic yank. . . .

Standing before the window, he began to breathe quickly. He had a strike. He talked to the fish as he reeled it in, his face cracked with hunger at the quick lurch downward, the dead weight like a waterlogged chunk of wood on the end of his line until it was suddenly convulsed with lunging terrible life. He was alone on the lake and above him the sky was hollow, the day was dying brown and gray beyond the hemlocks and birch, the rushes shivered in the wind. He whispered breathlessly to the fish. "Oh baby, come on now . . . why you sonofagun come home to papa! . . ." Quick as a trigger his hand shot into the water, a thousand sparks convulsing his body, a laugh breaking resoundingly from his lips as his frozen thumb and forefinger clutched viselike under the crimson gills of the fish, slapping, gasping, his shirt and trousers already covered with opalescent scales, blood clotting on his fingers . . . "Come on baby, I got you! . . ."

He would be still and contented, rowing home. There was the unreal hush over the lake, the deserted lodges of the summer people, the veil of mist over the water, the rawness of his tired body drenched in the icy spray of a fighting black bass. The laugh of a loon over the empty water made him bristle. He liked it better that he was alone on the lake. He felt at ease with the coming night. In the bays, where the water lay black with the quick twilight, stalks of drowned trees mingled their branches, stretching suddenly and gauntly upward. A mud hen wheeled from a dead stump as he paddled past. Everything was the way

he wanted it to be forever, a world without passion or dice or men or the need to win.

"If we go up north fishing," Sleigh promised, "then you'll feel better. You'll come back without that look on your face."

Charley turned, looked absently at the tray Sleigh held in his hand and shook his head. It was over. "No fishing," he said to Sleigh. But seeing the look on Sleigh's face, he took out his pack of cigarettes and tore off the coupon to give it to Sleigh, who saved them to give to Frieda. From his pocket he brought a second coupon, crumpled and folded, that he had torn from a pack that afternoon in Chicago to bring back to Sleigh. "You'd better see the folks out there are all getting drinks," he said, handing him the coupons, and like a child Sleigh obeyed him, not disappointed because Charley did not want to talk about fishing any more, but happy just to do what Charley told him. He left the office and as he opened the door there was the sound of chips rattling, the clink of silver dollars, the hushed hopeful cries of the poker players and the rush of the ivory ball around the roulette wheel. The big place was awake.

Charley dropped his head on his arms, listening to the sounds from the rooms outside. He kept thinking of all the money he was making and how all his life he had driven himself to the place where he was now, running the big gambling place in the fancy house that had once been Sarah Johnston's. He drove a Cadillac bigger than any Ben Sneller had ever owned; there was a car for Lon and a roadster for Paul when he started college a few weeks ago.

He was always surprised at how much money he was making now. He did not know what to do with it all but still could not give up the thirst for it. He spent it furiously,

returned large sums to men who had lost it gambling in his place, especially to young men, the still-frightened ones who did not gamble well—he did not enjoy winning unless he won with fever and skill. He paid big bonuses every Saturday night to Frieda and Sleigh and Titanic and Pete; he bought expensive suits and neckties and shoes and lavished money on Paul and Lon, who did not know what to do with it. Secretly by lavishing the money on Lon he was fighting her sister Alice, trying to prove he was something better than a no-good gambler. Lon just put the money in a bank. He could not change her.

But always when he counted the bankroll on Saturday nights, deducting the money he knew Rob had stolen, the money to the bootlegger Magglioni for the cases of prewar whisky he served his rich customers and the pay-off money for the police, he still found himself richer than a week before. Sleigh watched and never believed the big stacks of money he saw, trying silently to count along with Charley but always getting mixed up. Since it was dawn when they closed the place up, Frieda was usually in the pantry, frying a half dozen eggs for himself, dropping the eggshells in a pile on the sink for Sleigh to clean up. He did not even glance down when a shell rolled from the sink to the floor, making Sleigh run for a rag.

Pete stacked the silver, while Charley counted swiftly, shoving the silver beside the stacks of bills. "Here, Sleigh, buy yourself a new hat!" and without looking up from his counting Charley would let a ten-dollar bill flutter toward Sleigh. Sometimes he got three or four new hats on a good night. Charley wet his thumb as he counted. And always felt a useless wonder, watching the stacks' pile higher. It frightened him, riding on such a crest. He waited to topple into a trough of bad luck and then only spent money more recklessly like something suddenly tainted,

taking half the club out to the Grotto for whisky and steak and a stud game in the back room or crumpling a wad of bills into Frieda's fat hands, telling him to buy something nice for his old man out at the Jewish Home for the Aged, or handing Titanic a hundred-dollar bill, not saying what it was for, but everyone knew, it was to help pay the hotel rent for his wife Ellen who had gone loony and thought she had been kidnaped out of a fine Southern family. She had to live in a big suite with fresh flowers around all the time. Titanic was a sallow, beaten-looking man but a phenomenal golfer and kept making crackpot bets and winning, like saying he could toss a card through a crack in the door, and could. He would not have Ellen locked up because she had been good to him, and he remembered with dour joy how they used to stay drunk together for days at a time before she went off her head. They still did now, up in the suite, but it was different. But he appreciated what Charley gave him, though he did not know how to show it. So did Frieda, who tried for a year to think what his father would like out at the home, but always his mind was like a moldy dank log until he discovered he had enough saved up for the diamond on his little finger.

Charley did not care what they did with the money. Lon did not need it and that made it useless, because all his life she had been part of why he knew he must win it, as Paul had been part. But it was no good to Paul either. Still Charley had to keep winning the money because it was a proof of what he was. When he walked through the rooms of the gambling place and heard the clatter of chips, the raucous, profane laughter in the back room; or when he entered Sarah's old reception room and saw the rich men and women, their cigar and cigarette smoke soiling the heavy draperies, and heard the suave drone of Pete Senta

at the wheel, then he knew he had become what he had always wanted to be. He heard the men whispering to one another that this was the grand reception room of Sarah Johnston's old house, when it was known all over the country for its beautiful girls and their clothes, and then heard his own name on many lips. He had reached the place he had known all his life he would someday reach. He was rich and mighty. But as he watched himself grow richer he felt empty, cheated and tired.

If he hadn't gone down to Chicago that afternoon, he kept thinking. If he had not learned what he knew now. Nothing became real until you heard it in words. You could put it aside, until the sudden moments when it leapt at you. He had picked a doctor in Chicago because he was less known there. He did not want anyone to know—whatever he was going to learn, knowing in advance what it was, he wanted to hear by himself. He never wanted Lon to know or worry. As he listened to the doctor, sitting with his shirt hanging loose from his trousers, a sweat broke on his temples. A hollowness clung to the top of his mouth. It was not that what the doctor was saying was unexpected but that he was saying aloud and ineradicably what he had known for months he would hear.

It was a frightening voice, saying aloud something that had no real meaning so long as it was not said. But now with the harsh words—though the doctor's own voice was gentle, almost indefinite, he did not like saying what he said—the fact leapt at Charley, his guesses became reality, the words hastened something that before had only been coming slowly.

He felt he had been caught cheating. Behind his eyeballs a searing pain burned deep into his skull and a limpness tore unexpectedly through his body—the sensations that at last had made him go to Chicago. All at once his breath was

stopped and he went purple. The doctor waited. When he began again, Charley was grateful for the slow, almost somnolent way in which, studying the telephone on the desk, he lied to him. For the doctor did not say bluntly what was wrong, what was happening in his body, did not put his finger on a calendar, say until this date, this day of this month on which I have my finger, until then, that long, no longer. . . . But it came through his words. Behind the words he said were the other words, concrete and irrevocable.

A change, a long vacation, the sun in Florida perhaps, an end of work or worry or better still, several months in a hospital, the doctor said—but even with these words a doubt hung in his voice, a lack of conviction. He said without saying it that even these would really never help, nothing could really help, there was this day, you see, coming up on the calendar, this day of this month. . . . You might as well go home now and wait. Hospitals are for dying, Charley thought, remembering Lon's words. Hospitals are for dying if you're rich enough. He was rich enough. But he knew he would never go to any hospital and would never rest, that stopping work would be stopping life itself before that unspoken day arrived. He had no choice. He paid the doctor, tipping him a five-dollar bill as he would a waiter, looked puzzledly at the shock in the doctor's face and went out to look for a drink. He wanted to think. But when he got to a speakeasy and got a drink, he found there was nothing to think about. It had already happened.

A gust of wind blew against the boarded window of the office. He glanced up, expecting to see the wind leaning in against the boards. It had a cold sound, the sound of sleet in it, like the September wind that holds winter in its blow. It made him think of Florida. Some of the customers who came into the place to gamble in the roulette room often

went to Florida in the winter. Through the closed door he could hear the quick, mournful, cracking voices of the gamblers, the rattle of chips. He knew how easily he could afford a long winter in Florida. He began to think of the fishing down there, the stories he heard the rich customers tell. Lon would like the walks on the beach and the coconut trees; Paul would like the expensive hotels that charged thirty and forty dollars a day, all the well-dressed women and men.

In Florida there was Hialeah Park, the small jockeys in their bright suits hurrying gravely to their horses. And the fishing. He began to feel elated. It would be better than fishing up north with Sleigh and Frieda. He began to shiver. He saw the green swells of the water more turbulent than inland water tipping the boat almost straight upward, the swooping white clouds dropping below his eye level, the waves trying to knock the boat apart until another blue-green swell rose up, a lip of foam on its crest—he ducked, shielding his head with his arms and laughing curtly.

He felt foolish, sitting in his office with one arm thrown crooked over his head, his body arched sidewise to escape the spray. He got up to go to the roulette room, rubbing his eyes, to find some of the men like J. Walter Kersten who went down to Florida for the winters and talk to them. And as he opened the door he heard again the hushed, whispering sound of cards sliding against each other, the cries of poker players, the hunted shouts of "Raise . . . why, then raise you, you bastard! . . ." the plopping of the roulette ball and the gratey drone of his brother Rob at the crap table.

He was growing richer every minute.

Few men could hear the secret sound of dice and cards. But Pete Senta could. He could hear the sigh of a card

dropped from a deck when to all others it was soundless, or the scratch of dice on green felt long after they had fallen. He heard the rush of the ivory ball as it left his fingers, in the split second it traveled through air before it struck against the track of the roulette wheel. He was listening, his head tipped to one side. Then he glanced up at the ceiling, something turned in his memory, and he remembered that Charley was supposed to call Sergeant Harmon the minute he got in. He handed the croupier's rake to Frieda and met Charley just as he was leaving the office.

"I shouldn't forget to tell you," Pete said. "You've got to call Harmon right away. Up at the station. I was supposed to tell you the minute you came in."

"Harmon?" Charley asked.

"Sergeant Harmon," Pete repeated, looking worried. His black eyebrows tore upward and his lips parted.

Charley liked having Pete near him. He was only in his middle twenties but gambled like a man much older. He was too pretty, his hair too sleek and his cheeks lean and smooth like a young girl's, his eyes big, impatient, his lips small with a habit of pursing; but he was fearless. He was a gambler, Charley knew, the right kind, who understood the hard lonely talk that was made around a poker or crap table. He had it in his blood and eyes and fingertips the way Charley had it in his. No one could trip him, no one could make him flinch. He could sit in a game, a few thousand loser, every cent he had, his face going hard, the smooth cheeks shining like ivory but no muscle moving. He played a steady, nerveless game. There was always a look about him, that he would someday die with a knife in his heart or drown at sea. He wasn't afraid of losing his shirt, the way Bergson was, or of calling a bluff, the way Rob

was. He wasn't superstitious like Sleigh or afraid of the dark like big Frieda.

Remembering the doctor in Chicago, Charley wanted to put an arm around Pete. But he kept his hands dug in his pockets. For it was wishing that his own son were like Pete that had made him want to put his hand on his shoulder; Pete was his son, not Paul. It was Pete who went fishing or bowling or to play billiards with him at the Arcade and not Paul. They agreed about many things, argued about many things, but with Paul there was nothing to talk about. He tried and sometimes Paul tried but their eyes would not meet, and the poker hand Charley was trying to explain about never got played, the fish wasn't reeled in, the joke the boys at the club played on Titanic never was told about. This fellow Titanic, who works for me down at the place, he's got a crazy wife, see, so last night the boys got together, they had a little too much hooch in them maybe and . . . but he saw Paul's mind was wandering, he wasn't listening at all, he had the shut look on his face as though he thought himself too good for his father or to hear about his father's friends; and grinning weakly Charley walked away trying not to get hotheaded.

It was Pete who copied his way of dressing and the slant of his hat, and didn't get sore when Charley told him his neckties were too loud, they looked cheap, a nice stripe looked more high class. Pete took his word about those things. He was always asking advice about women. He talked about and got in trouble with and loved and cursed women, and came running to Charley to ask didn't women give him a pain in the ass, so that Charley would chuckle, saying there was at least one who didn't, Lon didn't. Pete looked grave and said Oh sure, Lon didn't. He went red, and would have knocked himself out if he had offended Charley. Ada Simpson didn't either, he said on reflection.

He added Ada because he knew she was a good friend of Charley's.

That was Pete. Charley took his hands from his pockets and began to wonder about Sergeant Harmon.

"He said you should call him," Pete said, "the minute you come into the place. Frieda says he wants some more booze."

"He got a case last week," Charley said.

"It means trouble," Pete worried. "I don't like that Harmon. I'll bet a buck he's going to start trouble."

"Harmon's all right. You worry too much."

"What do you suppose he wants? You better call, right away."

"Don't worry about Harmon," Charley said. "He won't start anything."

"Oh, sure. Harmon's all right." But Pete frowned.

"Maybe they drank that whole case," Charley said. All at once he felt a need for haste. The night had begun, the place was crowded and suddenly he had so much to do, as though all the things of the rest of his life had to be finished tonight. "I'll call Harmon," he said to Pete. "Right away. You better get back to the wheel."

"Joe Joseph, the barber, just took you for eighteen bucks," Pete said, laughing abruptly.

"You don't say," Charley said, also laughing, though Sleigh had told him before. He scratched his head, feeling suddenly better and more alive, the blood pouring back in him with the same pleasure everyone had felt to see Joe Joseph beat the demon. "You don't say. Watch out he don't break the bank."

He kept laughing quietly and returned to the office, closing the door behind him. For a moment Pete looked at the closed door, his mouth pursed, wondering what Sergeant Harmon could have wanted.

He was going to call Harmon at the station but before he could pick up the receiver the phone rang out at him. Then he recognized Lon.

She had been sitting home alone, afraid in the big white house with the wind stabbing through the trees outside. Ever since Pete Senta had called to ask if she knew where Charley was, she had wandered from room to room telling herself not to worry. But she did not know where Charley was. He had not come home for supper. He had left that morning, earlier than usual. So long, Lon, he said. He kissed her the way he always did, snapping his black hat back on his head before he bent toward her. But something different was in his eyes, a tired and absent look. She saw him walk out to the car and drive off and in her mind he seemed to be driving and driving far away from her.

The wind flung itself against the house. She tried to imagine where Charley could be but her mind was blank. When she stood before the mirror in the hallway she broke into laughter because she looked so solemn. But it was nervous and empty. A strand of hair had fallen on her forehead. She looked as if she had been running—she was surprised at the whiteness of her lips, the anxious creases alongside her temples. Then her quiet laughter cracked her face and made it bright again. Yet even her own laugh in the hallway sounded frightening. She hated the hollow house, the endless night, the wind shearing the trees outside.

She went out into the kitchen where she was always most at home. She was a strange wife for Charley to have, she kept thinking. She never got used to her luck in having him. She shuddered now at being alone in the house. She hated the nights. All her life she had never got used to them. She was a widow, alone, and even when she went to bed she would be waiting for morning, the chill gray light pressing against the window and suddenly he was in the room with

her, stooping forward as he unlaced his shoes, shed his trousers, always moving silent and ghostlike in the dull cold light, though he knew she must be awake—then at last dropping beside her, exhausted, worn, his body trembling. He would drop an arm across her, twitch once or twice, and by his quick hungry breathing she could never tell what his night had been, whether they were rich or poor, but could only tell how his ceaseless hunger would not let him rest, little by little was exhausting him. He sighed once or twice. Or he said, half asleep, Yes, yes, Lon, what a world. His fingers were clenched. He was half dead. Then he slept. He raced through his sleep, double-time, gobbled it like a starved child and awoke again by noon, after only four or five hours' rest.

The nights were what worried her, draining his strength, dulling his eyes. She did not know how he fed on them. She did not understand what gambling meant. She could not even play rummy, though he had tried one time to teach her. See, you try to get three of a kind like this or a run, three four five but all of one suit. . . . The fan of cards quivered in her hand. Oh my God, Lon. He was laughing without making any sound; he laughed in his eyes. She had a run, all right, eight nine ten like he said, but two cards were spades and one a heart. Why can't you take your hat off in the house? she answered angrily, What are we, farmers? She had never got used to his black hats. He was used to wearing one in poker and blackjack games and half the time forgot to take it off when he came home. The black brim reflected in his dark eyes, put a sharper line along his cheeks, dropped its shadow across his mouth. But he looked pale and tired. It was really what made her angry; he looked sick. See, he explained and still laughed softly, they have to be the same suit, what kind of gambler are you anyway, honest, you'll never make a living that way. Sure, I'll take

off my hat. He tossed the hat on a chair. Take off your hat and make yourself at home, he said. He winked at her. But tears hung in her eyes, though she would not let him know it. At last she dropped the cards, hurrying away; and he followed her, laughing as he held her in his arms. Then he went out and sent home the biggest cyclamen plant she had ever seen.

It was only something more to puzzle her—his extravagance seemed shameless. She never forgot the days when she had to borrow money for food or that they might come again. Now he drove big cars, wore expensive suits, wanted her to have servants who would have embarrassed her. But she did not know what to do with money. Whenever she tried to squander it, to please him, she spent it foolishly—she could not think of anything to buy. The thing was, she was Charley's wife but she wasn't a gambler's wife. She loved him and Paul and it was her world and all she needed.

A world that was sent rocking when Pete Senta phoned, to ask if she knew where Charley was. Why, isn't he there? she asked. No. Well, didn't he come down there this noon? No. Well, where else would he be? Accidents flashed in her mind. Then, as the hours passed, something else. The time a few years ago when he had come home mornings with a faint perfume woven in his clothes. The awful time of waiting and fear. But she did not think it could be something like that again because there was nothing now to drive him to it. She went several times to the phone to call the big place. The accident became more certain. He did not like to be called at the place, when he might be in the middle of a poker hand. But as the house grew bigger and emptier, with the wind hunting and lopping through the trees she could not wait any longer and went to the phone, hoping there was nothing wrong with Charley because she wouldn't know what to do if there was.

Her voice sounded distant and locked away to Charley. He could not reach her.

"Lon? Lon?" he kept asking. "Are you all right?"

"I'm all right but I was wondering are you all right?"

Her words sounded small, blown away from him in the wind. He saw her alone in the big white house, all the rooms looking twice as big as they were. "Are you sure you're all right?" he asked again. "Is anything wrong?" But she was home alone, he knew, with the long nights she hated. It was in her voice. "Isn't Paul there?" he asked.

"Paul? He's on a date with Esther Rosnik."

"He should leave those Rosniks alone."

"Why, she's a nice girl. She's all right."

"Rosnik isn't."

"Oh, he doesn't know that. Charley—" Her voice grew thinner. "Don't you tell him. He doesn't have to know about that."

"No, I guess he doesn't."

"He'd stop going with her. She's a nice girl for him to be going around with. She's nice company." And a moment later she asked it again, the only thing she wanted to know, the answer that would make the house less lonely and the wind in the trees less piercing. "Are you sure you're all right?"

All he could think of was that she must never know. "Sure I'm all right, why wouldn't I be?"

"Well, I was worried," Lon said, and he heard her voice quicken, "because they didn't know where you were. They said you weren't down at the place all day."

He waited. For a moment he could not think of an answer. "Nothing was wrong. I had things to take care of."

Then he heard her laugh. He felt relieved. It was all she wanted to know. He was all right. She had believed him and did not ask anything more. He could hear the wind against

the boarded window and knew how the wind must be gutting through the trees out where she was, but it was easier now because he had talked to her. She had heard his voice and believed him and not noticed any change and he knew that now she would never know the one thing he could not bear having her know. He felt so tired with relief that for a moment he believed that he did not mind that this day, you see, was coming up on the calendar, this day, that month, that year, you've got to take it easy, what do you think your body is made of, mister, iron? . . .

But Lon minded. She put the receiver back on its hook and went to the front hallway closet to get a sweater for herself, for the wind running against the windows was even colder than before. After the heat of the day it was bitter. Then she tried to read, staring at the black print of the newspaper—there was nothing in the lines of print to interest her. She got up and went into the kitchen to reheat the coffee that was always left standing on the stove; but the coffee was bitter and hot on her tongue. She looked blankly at the walls. Here was something she could not understand, could not fight against.

For she had heard the silence in Charley's voice—the pause before he answered her. And though at last he told her nothing was wrong, and for him she sighed with relief, she knew nevertheless that something was wrong; because he had hesitated, because whatever he said afterward she did not believe.

She pulled the sweater around her. She did not lower her head on her arms the way she wanted to, but made herself get up and go upstairs to Paul's room, methodically picking up the shirts, coat, ties, socks he had left flung over the chairs and bed as he dressed to go out on his date. She hung them on hangers and put them in the closet and put the

ties back on their rack and kept thinking, Something's wrong. But whatever it is, it musn't be.

She halted, in the middle of the room, her forehead wrinkled, staring down at the floor. She was trapped; she felt beginning in her the terrifying thought of a world without Charley. It came like a paralysis in her brain. She had never thought of such a thing before. She did not know why she thought it, except for the way she sensed everything about him long before it happened. But she could not imagine what this world would be like. She stood there trying to think, while the wind went racking around the house, pommeling the trees, uprooting their black shadows and tossing them up against the cold sky.

CHAPTER TWO

NINE O'CLOCK.

Who was asking what time it was? Titanic turned his mournful head slowly. It was Rob. Nine o'clock, Titanic told him. Without thanking him Rob went back to the crap room, patting his handkerchief on the back of his neck. That bastard wouldn't have sense enough to say thank you if someone told him his pants were on fire, Titanic thought.

Lon's short relieved laugh still rang in Charley's ears as he hung up, staring at the dark wet imprints his fingers had left on the receiver, and then remembered he was supposed to call Harmon up at the station.

Sergeant Harmon had a muffled kindly voice that made him seem to keep wiping his hand over his mouth while he talked. "Charley?" he said, and sounded surprised. "Oh. Charley."

"Charley King," Charley said.

"Sure. I know," Harmon said. "Well, how's Charley?"

"I'm fine," Charley said.

"They're keeping you busy, I'll bet," Harmon said.

All at once he felt sleepy. He waited to hear what favor Harmon wanted now, more booze or money or a tip on the horses. "They're keeping me busy. What's on your mind?"

"I hate to mention this, Charley."

"Go right ahead. You boys up there run out of hooch?"

Harmon laughed. "We can always use more of that," he said.

"I guess I can send up another case," Charley said. "You boys must drink it like water. Don't you think it ever gives out?"

"Oh, don't bother if you're short," Harmon said, and the voice grew fainter again, muffled and lost. "I hate to mention this, Charley—"

Then it wasn't just whisky he wanted. "Something else? I'm busy down here."

"Sure. I know," Harmon apologized. "I don't like to bring this up," he said, the voice dull as if he were rubbing his hand over his mouth, "but I'm afraid I got to raid you tonight."

He hadn't been raided since he opened the big place. He ran his free hand through his hair, scowling into the mouthpiece. "Tonight?"

"Tonight's a good time," Harmon said. "You can tell me what time to send the boys down. They won't break nothing up."

Charley's voice sounded raw. "What do you want to pull a raid on me for?"

"Well," Harmon said. "It'll look a little better. We've been getting some complaints."

"You're always getting complaints," Charley said. "I don't get it."

"Well, these are tough ones," Harmon said. "They've got this new vice commission behind 'em, that's screwing things up."

"I don't get it," Charley said.

Harmon sounded hurt. "You don't think I want to pull you in, do you, Charley?"

"I don't get it," Charley repeated, because there was something Harmon wasn't telling him, he wasn't getting it all.

"I wouldn't do it if it wouldn't look better," Harmon said. "I hope it don't make you sore."

"Oh no," Charley said, and thought of the hush money he was paying Harmon. "Do you have to take me along too?"

"It'll look better if we pull you in too," Harmon said, his voice muffled again. "But don't think we got a grudge against you. No hard feelings."

"Oh no," Charley said, "no hard feelings."

But he stopped listening as Harmon went on apologizing, because he was thinking instead of Paul, new in college now, and how the story and names would be in the paper, with his picture maybe, shielding his face with his hand. It always made it look wrong, as though they were part of the Chicago mob. He had not minded the raids and fines in the old place years ago, before he could pay big hush money, or his name in the paper except for Lon, who always pretended she had not seen the papers until he himself mentioned it, when her eyes went glassy; it frightened Charley, but it was only so that they would not brim over, that she held herself so still, only her mouth and chin trembling. But Paul was suddenly grown-up now, and had become not just Charley's son but a gambler's son; a secret he angrily and tensely guarded.

He interrupted Harmon. His voice went hard, sharp with the dryness inside his mouth. "Tonight's not such a good night, Harmon."

"Don't get sore," Harmon said. "Maybe some night next week suits you better."

He thought quickly. "Monday, that's a slow night. Your wagons won't be so crowded."

Harmon wiped the fear of disfavor from his mouth. Then his voice came back strongly. "How many wagons should I send?"

"About four should be enough," Charley answered, and again ran his hands through his hair, thinking that for

awhile at least Paul was safe, for awhile the wall that was growing between them would pile no higher; until Monday, at least, he would not lose him.

Charley went into the roulette room, looking for J. Walter Kersten. He looked strangely at the rich paunchy men and women clustered around the roulette wheel. He smiled to himself, thinking how they knew nothing about gambling—they did not know how to win or lose, they played for money and not for life, already having too much of one and none of the other. Sarah Johnston's old reception room for the first time seemed shabby, filled with the rich men and women; he noticed one of the mirrors above the mantel spotted with black as though with plague, a chip was broken from the mosaic floor, the room had an air of tawdriness despite the men and women in expensive clothes, drinking heavily of the free highballs Sleigh kept carrying in. He was surprised at how much contempt he had for these men and women, who kept making him richer. Being in the room made him feel cheated.

It was the other rooms of the big place, where the poker and crap tables were, that he loved—where there were no free drinks, unless he gave someone a shot from the bottle, where the gamblers were men he had known all his life, cardsharps, laborers, speakeasy owners, hotel clerks, book-makers, but all men who gambled not for a little sport but because they could not help themselves. He was comfortable with Frieda, little Bergson, Magglioni, Titanic, even with his brother Rob though he stole from him. But these were his friends. He grew alive, as he had all his life, when he heard the clatter of chips, saw the mute, cracked, hopeful faces, breathed the fetid air rife with the smells of smoke and bodies and paper money. In the crowded roulette room the only things that had life for him were

a few like the brewer J. Walter Kersten, or his friend the barber, or the clack of the ivory ball finding its number or Pete Senta's voice, droning over the wheel while he spun and raked, a flow necessary to him as the flow of his blood.

He wanted to ask Kersten what it was like in Florida. He had to hurry, this day coming, you see. . . . Why, that fishing will fix you up, that warm gentle sunshine like gold in your veins, you just stretch out on your back with your hands behind your head and before you know it. . . . But before he knew anything, he knew he could not spend a winter lying in the sunshine. Or in a hospital bed. Good God, man, you've got a pulse like a fire engine, the doctor had said thoughtfully, don't you think you'll ever give out? Slow down or. . . . Well, what? Well, you'll be sorry. But he had blood made to run fast; he could not sit still, his hands and feet were always moving. And again there was suddenly so much still to be done.

He did not want to ask Kersten about Florida. Sleigh came up to him. Sleigh had been looking all over the place for him and the thin mustache of perspiration hung over his lip.

"Somebody at the door," Sleigh said, "he says he wants to know if you're here."

"Who?" Charley asked.

Sleigh was happy because he had found Charley. "I don't know who he is, but he don't look good to me. He came here before, he wants to know is Charley King here. But he don't look good."

Charley shook his head.

"He ain't here?" Sleigh said, pleased.

"No," Charley said.

"There ain't no Charley King here," Sleigh said to him-

self, rehearsing as he moved away toward the door, happy that Charley had taken his word for it, that the man didn't look good.

Charley forgot about Sleigh and the man at the door and went to look at the poker tables. He wanted to see who was raking for him and who was sitting in the games, thinking he might sit in a game for awhile himself if one looked good but as he went toward the tables he could not keep his mind on cards. There was so much still to do, he thought. He knew that before next Monday there was something he must do. It was something about Paul.

He did not know how the wall had grown up between him and Paul. It had not always been there. It had started out well, like the times years ago when they went to poultry raffles on Sunday afternoons. The saloons were warm with the smell of beer, baked ham, potato salad, the naked geese and turkeys hanging limp behind the bar. Raffles were the kind of gambling Lon understood; for a quarter you bought a ticket, you held it in hot sticky fingers while the big rackets wheel spun around and if you were lucky you won something useful, something you could touch and see, a fat goose or turkey that could be stuffed, roasted, eaten, with company invited for dinner. Her happy laugh and light golden hair made Charley feel important. He was still a bartender in Jake Johnston's saloon downtown but people were beginning to know him, they came to his table among all the crowded tables to shake hands and meet Lon and say what a fine boy Paul was—How old is the kid? they asked. He'll be seven next year, Charley told them, snapping back his hat.

He spent more money than he could afford on raffles and drinks, beer for Lon and soda for Paul. But it was worth it. He became a proud father, a good provider, a faithful husband. Alice could not complain about him then. He

drank too much and held a ruddy, laughing smile on his lips. He wished he had a voice to sing. Everyone in the place liked him and the women envied Lon.

When they finally won a goose, he was disappointed. He was cheated. He had come off second best, because it should have been a turkey. Lon was excited and already was planning how she would stuff the goose and invite Alice and her husband for dinner. But Charley held a stubborn childish sorrow in his eyes; he should have won a turkey. It belittled him. He did not like anything less than the grandest and biggest. Geese were for the unimportant beer drinkers lined along the bar, the fat noisy families with unbeautiful children; turkeys for those who dreamed. A turkey was his by rights—he grew quarrelsome, his black hair falling over his temples. He began to feel insulted.

Suddenly Paul made everything all right. Charley was holding him on one knee. Then Paul put one arm tightly around his father. He thought it was wonderful, just that they had won. He had watched puzzledly while the wheel spun around, but saw the ticket his father held in his hand. The ticket was a bright red color against the thin black hairs on his father's wrist. Charley's fingers were neatly trimmed and polished. When the bartender brought over the goose, exchanging it for the red ticket in Charley's hand, Paul knew there must be something important about his father. He began to laugh. He clung to his father and leaned forward crookedly and perilously far to touch the fat pale neck of the goose hanging from the bundle.

But it made Charley happy to hear Paul laugh. It was enough. He knew he had pleased Paul, that somehow he was proud. Charley shoved one hand through his crumpled hair, balancing the goose on his knee, and began to think of himself again as a marvelous provider for Lon and Paul. He felt like exactly all the things Alice kept saying he

wasn't. Across the table, Lon was putting away her coin purse—they had won, so it was foolish to gamble any more. But Charley abruptly took a five-dollar bill from his pocket and bought a whole sheaf of tickets for the next raffle, and felt dozens of pairs of eyes on him, felt them thinking that he must be a rich and lucky and generous man. He felt of the diamond stickpin in his tie to make certain it was there. Lon looked worried, so that Charley winked at her; then she tried to hide her worry. But Paul broke into laughter again when the bartender threw the fan of tickets down on their table and his laughter made up for everything, it was all Charley wanted and he wondered how he could ever in his life want anything more.

Titanic was sitting in on a dollar-limit poker game and it was behind his chair that Charley was standing. Then Charley walked around the table. "What are you looking so sore about?" he asked. Titanic raised his mournful face. "Me? Nothing," he said. He had pale eyes with empty, wrinkled sacs beneath them, a young man in his thirties but with a forlorn, long face. He worried about his wife Ellen and how she was cracked but at the moment he forgot it, because he kept thinking how Rob did not have enough brains to say thank you when he told him what time it was. But he did not want Charley to know what he thought about Rob, since he was Rob's brother. "You look like something's eating you," Charley laughed. "Hell no," Titanic said. How Rob and Charley could be brothers was something Titanic could never figure out, like white and black, before and after, front and behind. Rob was an ugly bastard, a tightwad, a mean rotten heel. "Would any of you boys care for a shot?" Charley asked. The men around the table glanced up. He put a bottle of good bonded whisky

from his hip pocket on the poker table and wandered away. Titanic moved his gloomy eyes. "Thanks, Charley," he said.

The wall grew without Charley's knowing it was there. Two years ago, when Paul was sixteen, he took him up north to go hunting on a brittle gold-shot autumn day. Frieda and little Bergson went along. Paul did not like to hunt but enjoyed trailing after the men, a little uncomfortable with the gun he was carrying and which he knew he would not shoot, but liking the stillness in the woods, the bright colors of the men's shirts moving through the trees. In the evening, without having shot any of the deer his father expected to, they sat in the warm stove-heated shack around a hickory table. The three men wanted to play five-card draw poker but one of the men said, "How can you have a decent game three-handed? Why not ask the kid to play along?"

The sixteen-year-old kid who was too tall and too thin for his age was dealing, dropping the cards one by one. He might have dealt magic, the power he felt as he gave out each man's fate to him, his eyes large and fiery with his magic. This card is for my father, he thought, and took comfort in sitting beside him in a rare unnamed teamship, since they had no confidences for each other and faltered when they were alone together, their eyes shifting away when they met. Paul picked up his own cards and felt his face burn at what he saw, two aces, two kings, the four of diamonds.

"I'll open," Charley said.

"Why, to hell with you. I'll raise!" Bergson said.

Paul did not know much about poker, but felt important, sitting in this man's game, and heard the spitting of the stove, the trumpeting voices, his hands aching with his

mystery. Outside from the forest came a crackling, a breaking, the wind snapping through the trees. The sweat on his young hands made damp rings on his cards.

"I'll raise you all," Paul said.

Frieda scratched his thick neck slowly and glanced up, and little Bergson glanced up and then Charley looked in surprise at Paul, so that Paul almost burst with the surprise in his father's slowly awakening eyes. Then Charley smiled at Paul.

"That's the way, son," he said, and all the deep satisfaction that had never been there before was suddenly there, so that Charley looked conqueringly across the table at Bergson and Frieda, his eyes growing with a sudden mirth. For Paul was a gambler, Charley was thinking, he had nerve, he raised in the face of Frieda, he would not back down, he could play with passion, and he watched Paul's quivering fingers reach for the deck to deal the draw, his thumb sliding over the glossy cards.

The voices of the men grew tight and stiff. "I'll bet a quarter," Charley said. "Oh, will you?—well, then I guess I'll raise again," Frieda said, rubbing his hand lazily on his big gray-stubbled chin. "What do you think you've got that's so good?" Bergson cried, tossing in his quarters—"I'll raise myself! Raise!" Paul sat beside Charley, aware of the new tremulous comradeship between them, something they rarely had felt before no matter how much both tried, and then picked up his cards and his love grew greater. For now he was in Charley's world, the world he had not even glimpsed before through all his years of growing up, and when he picked up his cards he saw that what he had drawn was a third ace, after he discarded the four of diamonds; and he wanted to break into wild laughter—a full house, three aces and two kings. He is going to think I am wonderful, he thought. He is going to cry, That's the boy!

That's the boy! and he held the cards close to his chest, his face burning with the wind of the autumn day still on his cheeks.

"I'll raise you all again," he said.

"Up once more!"

"Raise—"

"Razoo, razoo!"

"*I'll raise you,*" Paul said.

"Raise again, raise you, Paul," Charley said.

Charley felt the teamship between himself and Paul, the closeness that had been so many years in coming, like something that was going to smash his blood over the walls of the cabin. He was decoying for Paul, playing a little crooked even to preserve his love for his son, betting his hand for much more than it was worth just to make the quarters pile higher and higher, betting to the sky to make the pot fat for Paul. Frieda raised, and then Bergson, his wrinkled face sweaty with fury. Paul raised, holding his cards pressed against his chest, and then the men began to call.

Charley put down three tens. Frieda let big sighs of laughter drop from his heavy lips and shook his head with its rabbinical stubble of hair as he put down his hand, an ace-high flush. Bergson, beaten already, tossed his cards angrily face down on the deck. The three men, Charley and his two friends, waited for Paul to put down his hand. When Paul put his cards down Frieda broke into laughter until he coughed and scraped in the piles of quarters.

Charley sat silent, not even glancing toward Paul. He shook his head a little and then began to laugh, not loudly, but not harshly, more a laugh that was pitying and embarrassed and ashamed. He sounded betrayed and beaten. Paul began to explain; and halted and started again to explain how he happened to have the hand he had spread

out in front of him—two kings, two aces, but one ace different from the one he had held at the beginning, and a four of diamonds, only two pairs in his hand, explaining how by mistake he must have thrown the first ace into the discard instead of the four of diamonds; and then he halted again. After he looked at his father he could not say anything more, but writhed as Charley kept laughing his embarrassment over what was left of their partnership, and the wall was there.

Titanic quit the poker game. He still felt grouchy about Rob and he hadn't won a pot yet. He saw Charley over at the water cooler.

"I think I'll have a drink too," Titanic said.

"Help yourself," Charley said.

"Thanks," Titanic remembered to say.

"How's Ellen?" Charley asked.

Titanic shrugged his shoulders mournfully, to say You can guess how she is, your guess is as good as mine. But Charley did not notice. He was thinking anyone might throw an ace away by mistake, he'd seen lots of poker players make mistakes like that, it wasn't anything to get all worked up about. He would like to tell that to somebody. He started to explain it to Titanic. "You remember that poker game up north with my kid a couple years ago," he began. . . . He shook his head, dropping his gaze from Titanic. "Oh no, you weren't along, it was Frieda," he said, turning away.

CHAPTER THREE

THE TWO strangers came in around eleven o'clock that evening. Later the men in the place blamed Sleigh, but there was nothing really to blame him for even though he did unbolt the thick metal door to let them in. When Sleigh lifted the cover of the peephole the two strangers said they were friends of someone named Stothart from Wausau, who often dropped in after football or baseball games. He thought he recollected someone named Stothart and let them in. They were plainly dressed, with a quiet nervousness about them like men with money in their pockets but not particularly used to gambling.

They looked new. Sleigh grinned and took their hats and coats. The two men had red patches on their cheeks from the cold wind outside and their skin had the silky gloss of apples. The wind hung around them in a little circle of cold. They called Sleigh George when they gave him their coats, the way they would call a porter on a train, but Sleigh did not mind and kept grinning, because he knew Charley liked his customers treated with style. He kept on grinning when one of the men flipped him a quarter and said, "Here you are, George." Saying George was almost like saying nigger; you could tell it was what the men were thinking when they said it. But Sleigh put the quarter between his white teeth and bit it, acting like a regular nigger for them.

At the same time he glanced quickly around, the quarter

flashing in his mouth, to make sure Frieda was not watching or listening, because once Frieda had stirred from his sleepiness to throw a dicebox at someone who called Sleigh a dirty nigger. Frieda said every man got a name when he was born. It was a name like John or Frank and that was the only name any other man had a right to use. Sleigh was sweating about what Charley would say when he heard there was a rumpus in his place, that night Frieda threw the dicebox. But when Charley found out, he looked squarely at Sleigh. Any man calls you by a dirty name, you got a right either to call him a dirtier name or to kick his slats in. You take your choice, Charley said.

"I don't call nobody a dirty name," Sleigh chuckled, thinking what would happen if he kicked a white man's slats in.

He watched the two strangers to see whether they were going to the roulette room, because then he would have to get them a highball, but the men went instead to the crap room in back. They did not talk to anybody or seem to know anyone. A few men at the poker tables looked up questioningly, then dropped their thoughts back to their cards. He was sure he remembered someone named Stothart, Sleigh thought, when a cigarette coupon on the floor caught his eye and he stooped to pick it up. He blew the dust off and put it in his pocket, to save for Frieda. Then he found the faintest shadow of grime on his snowy jacket and took out his handkerchief, wetting it, rubbing hard to wipe the spot away before Charley saw it. Charley'd get sore at him with a dirty jacket and someday, up north, in that boat, landing those big sonofaguns, Sleigh wouldn't be there with Charley and Frieda.

He could think of nothing worse than having Charley sore at him. It would be worse than having Frieda sore, and often Sleigh dreamed of what that would mean—

Frieda going away, moving out of the room he had upstairs next to Sleigh's and no one to live with him in the big gambling place that grew so gravelike when it was empty, no one to save cigarette coupons for or parts of his food and no dozen of eggs and three-pound steaks to fry every morning after the crowd went home and no faded felt carpet slippers to clap together each morning, to get the dust and smoke out, after Frieda had hoisted his big, bent, numb-with-sleep body upstairs to bed in the cold morning light.

Sleigh knew what it meant to be happy, working for Charley and living like kings in the empty rooms upstairs with Frieda. When Frieda got sore and moved away in his dreams, the sweat poured from Sleigh and he bit blindly into his pillow. But having Charley sore was something Sleigh could not imagine even in dreams. It was why he could not go into Charley's office to ask about letting the strangers in. He would not dare to take the chance of bothering him, since he knew Charley was busy with Ada Simpson.

She did not mind that he knew she was in love with him, because almost everyone had known it for years. When he took her into his office to have a drink she saw the looks Pete Senta gave her, and then Frieda, shuffling past with a new box of cards for the poker tables, his green eyeshade crooked on his broad creased forehead, a red welt where the elastic had been too tight on his temples. She saw the thirsty look Charley's brother Rob gave her, bumping into her unexpectedly as he came from the water cooler, where he had spilled sodium bicarbonate all over the little basin of the cooler. But she did not mind.

She took a cigarette and leaned against the desk while he lit it. Then she tipped her head back, her eyes narrowed

to escape the smoke, while she unrolled one of her stockings and rolled it again tightly in place just below her knee. She looked down to make sure the seam was straight. She was wearing a short evening dress just down to her knees and had short clipped hair.

Through the boarded windows they could hear the wind gutting through the alleyway—the boarded windows, the wind plunging against them, made the whole place seem isolated, a world of its own. Charley was unlocking one of the desk drawers, his dark head bent down. He brought out a bottle of whisky, even better than the prewar whisky he served the wheel-room customers. He poured out two straight drinks. He gave one glass to her.

"Glad you dropped around," Charley said. He smiled slowly. "Bumps."

"Bumps," Ada said.

She looked good to Charley. She had grown too thin and used too much rouge, but she still looked good. Ada and Pete Senta's mother, Pearl, were the only women he allowed to sit in the poker games with the men. She looked like the kind of a girl a gambler should have married instead of Lon. She smoked and drank too much and looked like the kind of girl Lon's sister Alice thought belonged with gamblers, but all Charley could feel in spite of those nights five or six years ago was a little sorry for Ada.

She had been one of Sarah Johnston's girls, when Sarah ran her house here where the gambling place was now. After Sarah closed the house Ada went to live with her, like Sarah's own daughter. Ada even called Sarah Mother now and went shopping for her and saw that she ate the right foods and went to the Grotto or came to Charley's with her when Sarah wanted to go out someplace and often sat up all night with her, reminiscing about the men that used to come into the house, the times they used to have, the

champagne, the money, the rotten bastards who didn't know how to treat the girls, and what bitches some of the girls had been themselves, especially the foul one Edith Swanee who didn't know her place, flirting with the big customers who were reserved for the best girls like Ada or the mulatto, Opal Griggs.

Sarah and Ada had come into the big place about thirty, and Sarah, over seventy now, had gone into the roulette room that used to be her own reception room, her jet bag, crammed with bills, hanging like a ripe black fruit from her twiglike fingers. She liked to gamble, to have something to fill her time, losing huge sums to Charley and breaking into high chattering laughter, a hundred wrinkles coming on her tiny face—there was nothing else to do with all the money she had made and she was glad to lose it to Charley. Someday she would have to leave it behind with someone.

Ada had a reason for bringing Sarah to Charley's that night. The Filipino chauffeur, who used to be Sarah's porter, drove them up and as soon as Sarah was in the wheel room, Ada went to look for Charley. She found him in the back room, holding up the crap game while he measured the dice with a pair of calipers. He often went back to measure the dice, to let the customers see his dice were perfect. It made him feel right, letting the customers know that his place was on the level. Then he tossed the dice back on the table, looked around at the men with a faint grin to say I told you these dice were perfect, and took Ada back to his office.

She drank her shot in one gulp. The groaning wind made the office seem chilly. She puffed on her cigarette. "I saw your friend last night at the Grotto."

"What friend?" Charley asked.

"Rosnik."

He began to laugh. Years ago he had caught Rosnik cheating in a nickel-limit game. He had never liked him since. "He's been coming around lately. He's dropped a few thousand dollars in the last couple of weeks." He enjoyed taking money from Rosnik or from any crook.

Ada hugged her thin shoulders. "Out at the Grotto last night," she said, "he was crying because you're taking all his dough. You better go easy."

"I'd like to bleed him broke. Bastards like that, no one even wants to spit on."

But it made Charley laugh. He enjoyed beating Rosnik, because he played crooked. Ada took out a small vial of perfume from her purse and put little dabs of it behind her ears. "You better go easy," Ada said, "you got enough dough." She held out her glass. It's a long time between drinks, she was going to say, but then she didn't say it, glancing up at Charley. He looked as lean and hard as he had looked years ago. He always seemed to be running, the way his hands and feet could not be still. She looked thin and tired. She watched him for a moment, rubbing her hand up her arm and letting it rest on her elbow. A thin edge of color crept up her cheeks. She looked as though she knew she ought to give up but did not want to. Still, she couldn't get sore at Charley, knowing how he felt about Lon. She'd never met this Lon and never wanted to; it was better that way. She didn't like looking over fences. It was useless anyway. She jabbed out her cigarette and held out her glass to him. She wanted to say Hell, you can at least give me a drink, but said instead, "You go easy on Rosnik. He cries too much." She watched the liquor as he poured it from the bottle. Suddenly he had stopped laughing because of the way she was looking at him, a way that could not mean anything to him any longer and did not even remind him,

except dimly, of those nights five or six years ago. All that reminded him of it and made him glance up, smiling faintly, was her perfume as it reached his nostrils. It wasn't his fault, she admitted that much. At least they were damned good friends. "Oh God, what a gag," she said aloud, slipping down from the desk and putting her high heels firm on the floor. From the motion her perfume stirred around her in waves.

Lon left the house. It grew too big. With all the windows closed the house grew stifling and when she opened a window, the wind leapt in catlike. She banged it shut again. Her heart hammered. She could not stop worrying. Because something in Charley's voice nagged at her—she was certain something was wrong. She tried to think what it might be. He might have lost all his money, everything they owned—it did not bother her, so long as there was money enough to eat and money to clothe themselves. He had been gone all day, but would not tell her where he had been. Something might be wrong at the big place. He was in some kind of trouble. So long as it wasn't something like those nights years ago when she smelled the perfume on his clothes, with Charley so oblivious that he did not even know that his clothes reeked sweetly. But she never had told him she knew. She never would.

At last the house was too big and too empty. The wind would not stop. She took off her sweater and went for her hat and coat. She thought of leaving a note for Paul but knew he would not be back from his date with Esther Rosnik until late at night. The wind was blowing around the house like something lost. So long as Charley wasn't sick. So long as the nights of dice and chips and smoke and worry and winning and losing hadn't at last won out. Thinking that nothing really mattered so long as she could keep

Charley, she turned out the lights, standing in the dark for a moment to think where she could go.

The night Ada's perfume had first found its way on his clothing had been the same night he discovered he had a bankroll and knew, walking home in the dawnlight, that now he was at the moment he had always wanted to reach, that now he could open a gambling place of his own.

It was the only time Lon turned on him. He was still only a bartender then in Jake Johnston's saloon. Sarah, Jake's wife, was running her house with all the girls in Paris dresses and the customers spending so much money that Sarah had diamond rings for each finger and was making a hundred times more money than Jake made in his saloon. But Jake had always been a saloonkeeper. He loved his saloon and could not leave it in spite of all the money Sarah was making.

After Prohibition he just locked the doors and handed out keys to all his friends and kept on running the saloon. He automatically got protection because Sarah paid so much to the police. The police figured it was all in the family. After he closed the place up at night he would walk down to Sarah's house, two blocks away, and sit in the fine reception room with her, listening to the water playing in the crystal fountain and helping Sarah greet the customers, as though they were giving a party. He enjoyed meeting the famous men who came, prize fighters or famous aviators and lumber barons from up north and actors when road shows came to town.

But when Jake closed up the place and went down to Sarah's each night, Charley always went out looking for a poker game. He sat in a game now every night. There was a big unused room behind Jake's barroom and Charley often thought it would make a good room for a gambling place;

it flashed in his mind whenever he made a big winning, making his breath come short and sweat stand on his temples.

He was lucky and played with nerve. Sometimes the games were friendly and sometimes cutthroat. He almost enjoyed the cutthroat games most, playing until his fingers were limp and hot from holding the cards. He would play in clubs, or in a room behind the cigar store that little Bergson owned, or in hotel rooms. Then he ran into a crazy streak of luck. He couldn't lose. He won every night he played until the other players gave angry laughs when he sat down in a game. They pushed their hats back on their heads, watching him in hawklike envy. He would go white with a sick, lurching fright when he bought his stack of chips, unable to keep the flitting restlessness from his eyes. He laughed to himself. He kept thinking his luck couldn't hold but at the same time he knew he was going to beat them again, night after night. Soon he was playing not for money but for his own blood. He kept winning like clockwork.

He had begun to play regularly with Titanic and Bergson and two friends of Bergson's. They played in front of the open window in Titanic's room at an inexpensive hotel, their coats off, the moist spring night wind brushing on them. Titanic had a long face with gloomy love-stricken eyes; he was very courteous to his guests in the dingy room. The soft night wind made the room seem bigger than it was as it blew through the window past the musty curtains. Sometimes the eager breeze tipped over a card and then they had to deal the hand over again, but they could not close the window because of Ellen.

Ellen, Titanic's wife, slept in the same room in which they played, and said she wasn't going to sleep in a room reeking with filthy cigarette smoke. She talked a lot about living in a spacious, lavish hotel suite someday. She did not seem

to know that people also lived in houses or flats; she always asked people at what hotel they were living. She was almost pretty, with bushy red hair, and sat in the game a few times but always lost. She hummed while she played and always had to be reminded to throw her chips in the pot, and never knew what kind of hand she had, until Titanic asked her why she didn't just throw her money down the sewer, it would save time. As soon as he said it he looked scared because he had said it. Then she grew sullen and quit the game and began pouting for a drink. They didn't have any whisky, so Charley had to take Titanic over to Jake's saloon, unlock the door with his latchkey, and get a quart of whisky for him.

She said she didn't want whisky; she wanted a quart of champagne. Charley and Titanic had to go back to exchange the bottle for a quart of champagne. She wouldn't offer the champagne to any of the men, but sat scowling on the edge of the bed until she had sipped nearly half the quart, right from the bottle. The rest she poured down the washbowl. After that she fixed them with a hurt look until, about three in the morning, she went down the hall to the public bathroom and returned in a changeable silk kimono, her hair tied up with a ribbon and cold cream all over her face. She crawled into bed and shed the kimono under the covers and finally emerged from under the covers like wriggling from a cocoon. She drew up her knees, locking her arms around them, and smoked a cigarette and watched the game for awhile until suddenly she burst into high laughter and said she was going to sleep and those bums could play until Christmas, for all she cared. She always said it as though the men minded it, her going to sleep. At last she turned out her bed light and winked at Charley with a funny smile and humped herself up under the covers, sleeping with her rear facing them. But she

never let them close the window. When they tried to shut it, she woke up in a second, blinking her eyes and telling them they smelled bad.

Charley enjoyed playing in Titanic's room; and he kept winning. A secret, expectant joy hounded him. He tried to blind himself to it for Lon's sake and tried not to admit what was growing in him, though he always knew what he was heading for, exactly what he had known deep inside him on the day he ran away from his home and his parents and the farm; he kept feeling bigger, stronger, and even began to play wild, unable to lose, assuaging Lon with all the money she could use, paying all their debts and even putting money in the bank, buying new mohair furniture for the parlor and a bicycle for Paul, until coming home from Titanic's room in the white still June light one morning he knew he had reached exactly the point he had always been heading for. He discovered he had a bankroll.

He could not sleep. He undressed in the greenish light falling through the drawn window shades and tiptoed to bed so as not to wake Lon, but once in bed only lay with his hands behind his head, staring up at the ceiling. He turned to look at Lon, her face twisted slightly away from him, calm, her lips parted a little, her long light-colored hair tangled over the pillow. He felt a strand of her hair on his pillow, scratching his ear; the single strand glinted in a ray of light—he lifted his hand carefully to move it away. He was certain she was awake. He wormed his arm cautiously under the covers to lay it across her warm body, but she did not move. He was wide awake. His wakefulness was so clear and calm and content that he was not even aware of dropping off to sleep.

Lon's sleep crumbled off in her frightened dreams. An hour later when she stirred and rose, Charley popped into wakefulness as easily as though he had never slept. But he

did not open his eyes. He lay stone-still listening to her put on her house dress, the plink of hairpins against the hand-painted pin tray on the dresser, the soft rattle of the window shade as she raised it a few inches to let in the bright clean-smelling air. He could see her clearly behind his closed lids—slipping the dress over her head, letting it drop with a soft whisper, smoothing it out. He rolled on his back, as wide awake as if he had slept nine hours, and listened to Lon getting breakfast, heard Paul in the bathroom washing, the sunny slam of the screen door as Lon went out to the stoop for the milk, at last heard Paul leave for school.

Still with a little sleep wound around her Lon was carrying Paul's dishes to the sink, when she glanced up and saw Charley in the doorway, barefooted, still in his nightshirt. She started to smile, but her face changed to alarm. "What's the matter with you, coming out here barefoot?" she cried. "Do you want to catch cold?" But she looked at him strangely, her eyes caught with fright. "Why are you up so early?" Without waiting for him to answer she went to the bedroom to bring out his slippers, making that the important thing to be got through first.

He walked to the open window. He saw the bright sunlight. He felt warm and full—nothing had come yet to mar his new, strange peace. The trees shimmered.

She dropped the slippers at his feet. "Well, can't you talk? Put those on!" But her voice gave off raspy sparks; it grew tremulous. It was because she was frightened. Her face had a hesitant wonder and her blue eyes were grave. She knew something had happened. "I suppose you lost all your money again?"

He did not answer. He had not even been listening, for in a corner of the kitchen, piled on top of a basket of wash,

he found one of his bartender's aprons. He held it up by two fingers. "You needn't bother ironing this," he said.

She took it away from him. "Don't get it all dirty!" She was worried and puzzled by his smile. Then he could not have lost his money, but she did not know what else it might be. She knew that if she waited long enough he would tell her what had happened. She went to the stove to heat the coffee, waiting. But suddenly she could not wait any longer. "Why shouldn't I iron your apron? You can't go to work without it."

"That's what I'm thinking."

"Thinking what?"

"I'm not going down to the saloon any more." He saw her face light up, and added quickly, "I thought I might open up a place of my own."

"A place? What kind of place?" But she went deathly white, already knowing what kind of a place.

"A little club—a place."

"A club?"

"A gambling place."

His head spun. He jerked his hand quickly through his hair. When he could force his eyes up he saw that color had rushed to her face, her eyes flashing. He saw their lids flutter, the eyes moist and defiant. He knew she was thinking of the endless long nights that would come to her now for the rest of her life, nights filled with dread and danger to spend alone; and of what her sister Alice would say; and of Paul, a gambler's child; and of the uncertainty of riches or poverty that would plague them all the rest of their lives.

"I could make big money," he said softly. His voice trembled as he said it.

They glanced at each other, each reading the same thing in the other's eyes before he turned back to the window. He wanted to take her in his arms, but he knew that now

she would not let him. He knew he was hurting her but also that he could not help himself. He wanted to make her understand, and then his mind reeled again with riches, plenty, as much of everything as they wanted; and all these things, as he framed them in his mind to say to her, arguing, protesting, convincing, died unheard, and never passed his lips.

He left the kitchen and she heard the bed creak tiredly as he crawled back in. He fell asleep almost at once. He slept so soundly that he did not awake until after six o'clock that night. But when he awoke, Lon was gone. She left a note on the kitchen table saying she had taken Paul over to Alice's for supper. It was not unusual. What was unusual was that she had not left anything, waiting in pots and kettles on the stove, for him to eat. It was the only way she knew to protest and abandon him.

He dressed slowly and carefully and took a cab downtown. But when he left the house, he walked out alone, a gambler, outcast, with a reckless slant to his hat. He never wavered in knowing he was going to open the gambling place. He felt angry and exultant. He went to Sarah's to look for Jake, to see about renting the empty room behind the saloon. In the June evening, the breezes licked moistly and sounds carried with a hollow ring from distances. All he felt about Lon was a grudging hurt that she had denied him. She made him feel guilty, when he knew that it was something inside him that had led him to just this moment, something that had been driving him all his life. He could not see why she did not understand. He was betrayed and deserted. He could hear Alice. He knew that at last she had won out, not knowing that at that moment Lon already understood about him, why he must do what he did; she was already buttoning Paul's coat to take him back home,

her ears locked to Alice's nagging, her eyes glistening with frightened tears.

Sarah's place was just coming to life for the evening. He often dropped over with Jake, for drinks or just to see Sarah or to watch Jake and Sarah play fan-tan together in one of the upstairs private rooms. Fan-tan was the only game Sarah liked. But she forgot how to play from time to time and kept arguing with Jake, halting the game to look up the rules in Hoyle and then breaking into shrill happy laughter when she found out she was wrong, as though it were a big joke she had played on Jake.

She was over sixty and when her tiny lips broke into a smile a hundred minute wrinkles came on her rouged cheeks, like the print of insects' feet on sand. She was tiny, with her hair piled high on her head to make her look taller. She was good-natured, generous to everyone she liked, treating all of her girls like her own children and never letting any of the men insult them. She never thought of running a house as something illicit. She thought sex was a good normal habit like eating or sleeping; she had a high respect for it, and when the Common Council decided the city should have a bigger zoo, and that Sarah was a good person to help finance it, she gave them a sacred bull. She loved her husband Jake, who in turn had adored her for forty years, and she wore grape clusters of diamonds in her tiny shell-ears.

The rich rooms and imported furniture, all the spending, reminded Charley of Ben Sneller and the Everleigh girls in Chicago. There were velvet drapes and gilt mirrors and chairs and mosaics in the floors. It was the kind of world he would have liked to build for Lon to live in. Anastasia the Filipino porter let him in and took him into the reception room while he went to get Jake, who was upstairs helping Sarah get dressed. Jake liked to watch Sarah get

into her fine clothes. He always thought she was more beautiful than any of her girls.

Charley was still waiting when Ada came in. She was in her late twenties but was still the most popular girl in the house. Sarah's girls weren't the cheap kind; they were the best. Ada did not know Charley was waiting in the reception room and went suddenly paler when she saw him. She raised one hand to her forehead and shook back her hair. "Hello, Charley." For a second her eyes lighted, as though something good were happening to her, but then she cast them down, looking at the three empty beer bottles she was carrying in the crook of her arm. She had been upstairs listening to one of the girls rehearse a new song, "That's Why I'm Lonesome and Blue," and was carrying the bottles back to the kitchen. "How's the big shot?" She said it with a little sarcasm, but there was something wonderful in the way it sounded. With the bankroll Charley had in his pocket, it sounded true. There was something tense in the way she stood there. She had never been alone with him before. When he offered her a cigarette she gave a little laugh. His hands with their fine black hairs looked clean and hard. She had looked tired when she walked into the room but now something rushed desperately to her cheeks. There were thin gray shadows under her eyes that her powder couldn't cover but suddenly she felt they were not there. She felt taut all over.

She was thinking about what Sarah had said to her one night, after Charley had been over to play fan-tan with Sarah and Jake. She didn't know how Sarah knew. "Don't waste your time on Charley King," Sarah said, "he's twenty-two carat but he's in love with his wife, he thinks she's holy, he's that kind of a fool, besides he's a poker player and no poker player has time for anything else. Keep your mind on your work," Sarah said.

But that only made him seem better. Her mouth trembled as he held out a match for her cigarette. "Do you like jazz? I was just listening to Opal practice a new song." Then she looked up. She looked scared and her eyes narrowed. "You aren't here for a girl, are you?"

"I'm waiting to see Jake. I think I'll open a little place."

"I thought maybe the world was coming to an end." She laughed shortly as she set down the beer bottles. "You're so damn superior, aren't you?"

"What's the matter?" He flicked out the match.

"You're so damn superior." She looked at him anxiously. She began to talk quickly, things she had wanted to say for a long time. "You act like you don't know other people are living."

He began to drift into a wonderful future, hearing her talk. His own gambling place, the big money, her low-cut dress, the thin elegance of her body, all swam together in luxurious future hours. He began to think she was the kind of girl he should have had. Lon did not like him for what he was. But Ada liked him just because he was what he was. She was watching him strangely, almost catlike. It was a strange look on her, because she was used to so many men. She was afraid that Jake might come downstairs before she could say the things she wanted to say. The Filipino, Anastasia, came back into the room with a highball for Charley while he was waiting; his slow, usually vacant eyes grinned at Charley when he saw him with Ada.

As soon as the Filipino was gone again, Ada came close to Charley. "Why don't you come upstairs with me?"

He saw her face had gone dead white under the powder and rouge. She took him upstairs the back way so they would not run into Jake or Sarah. He went half without thinking what he was doing but the other half knowing perfectly well. He held his cigarette cupped in his hand and his face

muscles did not move, following her perfume up the stairs, feeling that with each step he took he was getting closer to where he wanted to be, was getting richer, luckier, wilder, a bigger and bigger shot. In her room, he tossed his hat over to a chair. He missed his aim and it rolled to the floor. They had the Filipino bring up a bottle of whisky and he gave him a five-dollar tip to keep quiet. Before the Filipino left, he picked up the hat and put it carefully on the chair. Then Ada seemed so calm about knowing what she was doing and what she wanted from him. With a quick smile she came toward him and put her mouth close to his ear, Jesus, why did he keep asking what was going on, she kept whispering, the words short and breathless, what did he think was going on, who cared if he was a married man? Who asked him? she laughed softly, tearfully—it was all a big joke, it was like a bus driver taking a bus ride on his day off, did it matter whether a man was married or not? “It’s a little late to be asking questions,” Charley said.

He saw her often during the next weeks. It was the best time of Ada’s life but she always looked as though some bitter defeat had come to her. After he had been with her he got a vacant look on his face. She knew what he was thinking. He was thinking of this wife of his, Lon. He looked twice as much in love with her than before he came to Ada. He even looked ashamed. He held a stubborn distant smile on his lips as he took out his bankroll and handed her a twenty or sometimes two twenty-dollar bills. She was not offended; he wasn’t paying her, it was natural that he would take care of her, telling her to buy herself something.

They drank together often and during those weeks the angry, hurt light hung in his eyes. Sarah and Jake pretended they knew nothing about it. He never talked about Lon to Ada. All the while with Ada he acted as if he were try-

ing to prove something to himself. Ada, when he had been with her for the last time, knew that it was their last night. He was going back home; she felt him drawing away. He was running his own gambling place now, behind Jake's saloon, and his whole need for her seemed to have vanished the first night he opened the place. He got a wild, feverish look. Before he left her he handed her five twenties—it was the only way he knew of thanking her. She took the twenties and folded them into a roll no thicker than a thin pencil and slid them dazedly into her stocking. He noticed a little rough patch on her knee as she lifted her skirt. "You're funny," she said, with a faint laugh, and turned to go to her dressing table and smooth her hair.

When she came back she looked beaten again. She had put still more rouge on, much too much, but the defeat shone right through. She knew she could not hold him but she knew how to lose. Her lip curled on one side; she made a whispered sound, as if to herself. Then she looked up, trying to laugh. "Do you think I'm a horse's rosette?" She looked away again. "Just throwing myself at you like that, like I wasn't anybody." She lit a cigarette. "You're so damn superior," she said, forgetting to puff on the cigarette. Her eyes looked at him absently. "You're funny." She laughed again, making him feel he was not there. "But you're all right," she said.

Outside the door, Sleigh stopped Frieda as he was going toward the office. "You better not go in there," Sleigh said, "Ada Simpson's in there." At the same time Pete Senta came from the wheel room. "Don't you two bother Charley. He's busy with Ada," Pete said. He glanced sharply from Frieda to Sleigh. Frieda lowered his green eyeshade over his lazy eyes. They imagined some wonderful secret life for Charley behind the closed door but they did not talk

about it, because even in a gambling place the men knew what honor was, it did not take dress suits or exclusive clubs like the German Club. They might say "He's got Ada Simpson in there" with a knowing look at each other, but they said it as though they said it to themselves. They wouldn't let anyone get past them to bother Charley.

"He'd kill us," Sleigh grinned.

The wind shook the boards across the windows. He was laughing but there was fright in his voice. It was the damnedest thing, he kept thinking. It rushed on him unexpectedly, he had no will or control about it. He felt first a raw prickling behind his eyelids and remembered wondering why Ada was standing there; it was not tonight, it was this afternoon in the doctor's office in Chicago and she had no right to be standing there. So far he had been able to hold himself together. He could think the doctor had said the words not to him but to someone else, someone standing next to him. But then a wave of panic pounded against him, so that his throat felt hollow; Lon, Paul, the succession of gambling places he had run, his whole life, welled before his eyes and made the burning pain. He thought blood was bursting inside his mouth. His wind was gone and his body stiffened. It was the damnedest thing. And then the damnedest thing of all, he thought, the sight of a grown man bawling, his hand over his face, and the grown man, here in his office, was himself.

All of a sudden he was nothing, he was helpless. He pressed his fingers against his eyeballs; he did not want to die. It was losing in some monstrous poker game—a staggering loss, the kind he had never dreamed of before. It was the highest stake of all. He felt broken the way men must feel when they are handed life sentences.

Ada was staring at him, her eyes big with fear. It was a

bad thing to see. "What's the matter, what got into you?" she asked. Then she took his lowered head in her arms. She could touch him again, not knowing the deal of the cards that had once more given her the chance. His skin felt dry and burning. She looked shocked and suddenly much older, so grateful to have him in her arms. All her body went limp, like the bloom going out of a flower. It was a kind of withering, just from having waited so long to hold him close again. "Are you all right now?" she asked a moment later. He nodded, his head pressed close against her breast. She did not ask him again what was the matter. She was afraid. It was enough, having her arms around him. She went a little paler. But it was also the happiest she had been in years.

CHAPTER FOUR

FRIEDA

lifted both his heavy arms and stood leaning forward in front of the electric fan. It was hot and airless and smoky in the place. He caught the breeze on his wet shirt front and along the undersides of his massive arms until he began to feel fresher.

There were those who said by God, Frieda hasn't been outside of this gambling place for a year, not knowing how truthfully they spoke. He had not been out of the place in over a year and a half, except twice, having his meals brought in by the Chinaman. Sleigh took care of his laundry and errands like getting newspapers or a new pair of carpet slippers that Sleigh tried happily on his own feet in the shoe store, good expensive slippers, and if they hurt all over Sleigh's feet, pinching and squeezing and bursting at the seams, then Sleigh knew they were the right size because Frieda's feet were that much smaller than his own.

Frieda slept all day and by the time he got up in the afternoon Pete Senta had the horse book going downstairs. Sleigh had a stack of pancakes nearly a foot high ready for his breakfast and once a week he reminded Frieda to change his underwear. After breakfast it was time to start work; Sleigh already had the floors mopped and the ashtrays cleaned, trying to blow the foul smoke of last night's crowd away with the electric fan. There wasn't any place Frieda ever wanted to go outside, even though Charley told him he needed some air.

"Man alive," Charley said, "why don't you go to a ball game or take a walk down to the lake before your lungs rot from this stink night after night? Or do something healthy like take a walk to the movies. Here's fifty bucks," Charley said, "why don't you run out to the Jewish Home for the Aged and see your father?" But Frieda had already forgotten about his father out at the home. He forgot him as soon as he had saved up enough to buy the diamond ring on his little finger. It was better for him not to remember him, a man who was old and sick and religious and quarrelsome, making an outcast of his son because he worked in a gambling house. Frieda shook his chunky head; his ferret's eyes looked mutely at the fifty dollars, but he did not take it.

"I'll tell you what," Charley said, scowling. "You come out to our house for dinner some night. I'll have Lon cook us a decent meal, a good fried steak and mashed potatoes."

It was one of the two times Frieda went outside the big place. He drove with Charley in the Cadillac out to the white house, bringing along a box of nickel Tango caramel bars for Charley's boy, forgetting that Paul had grown up, and a whole Roquefort cheese, ripe with age and mold, for Lon. He ate almost half the cheese himself. Later he forgot to thank Lon for the dinner, looking glum and thoughtful when Lon invited him to come again, as if he were weighing in his mind whether he would or not. But he enjoyed the dinner. When Sleigh asked eagerly what he had to eat he could not remember—meat and potatoes, he said, but he couldn't remember what kind. He frowned for awhile, his massive forehead creased beneath his gray stubble of hair, and looked nettled because he could not remember; but it was a lot to eat, he said, plenty of everything. It satisfied Sleigh.

The second time he left the gambling place it was to go

with Sleigh to the undertaker's to look at the body of Sleigh's younger half-brother, who had been knifed. Sleigh got sick thinking of having to go alone. He knew it was useless asking Frieda to go with him, because Frieda never left the place. There was no one else Sleigh would dare to ask to go to a colored funeral parlor with him. It would have been wonderful, he thought, if he had dared to ask Charley to go with him. It would have made him crazily happy just to see the looks on people's faces when they saw someone as important as Charley walking through the door and solemnly going up to the bier at Sleigh's side.

Sleigh dressed neatly, feeling he was coming down with some terrible disease. He would rather be dead himself than look at the dead. But when he went downstairs he found Frieda in a clean shirt and pressed suit and wearing his hat, sitting waiting at a table dealing solitaire to himself. When he saw Sleigh he got up without a word and went along with him.

It was better than Sleigh could ever have hoped. His younger half-brother looked beautiful, looked like a million dollars, wearing a new suit, shirt and necktie, and the gash across his cheek and throat so well patched that you scarcely noticed it. Frieda touched his big clumsy hand to Sleigh's elbow as they went toward the coffin, steering him gently. That was enough in itself, having everyone see that Frieda was his friend. But next to the coffin was a wreath at least five feet across with the card placed carefully across one of the lilies, so that it could be plainly read—*Mr. and Mrs. Charley King*. Sleigh's heart leapt. The flowers looked so expensive they must have cost more than the whole funeral, and the funeral was a good one because Sleigh had contributed a part of his savings to it. His father sat near the wreath from Charley, smiling mildly, and his foster-mother beamed, through her yellow tearful eyes, her pride

and gratitude and her grief. It was a wonderful world, Sleigh thought, where everyone loved each other and did nice things for one another and after the services, on the way back to the gambling place, Frieda lumbered into a burlesque show and paid for Sleigh's ticket. Sleigh felt proud to be alive, honest to God, a man could have such good friends.

Frieda turned slowly sidewise to catch the breeze from the fan all over himself. Noisily, profanely, with splattering laughter and the gusty, nervous hopes of the men, the place had filled up. The money burned holes in their pockets, Frieda thought, swinging his tiny eyes of pitch about him. They can't sit still, every last nickel and dime in the place might get away from them, they got to go after it, they can't let well enough alone. They itch all over. They're just itching after Charley's dough. They don't know when to quit, they got to keep grabbing until they lose their pants. They can't sit still. They're crazy with the itch.

The men cursed and hoped around the poker and crap tables, their faces pallid under the bright swinging lights, their damp fingers crooked with waiting to reach for the chips, their bodies hunched forward until they shifted restlessly; around the blackjack table the silver dollars fell with deep gloomy chimes through the men's fingers. The roll of the ivory ball from the roulette room rolled through the place, like something loose going frantically round in a brain. Frieda snapped his elastic arm bands momentarily loose, feeling the blood course with sudden freedom through his veins. He swung his head on his chunky bull's neck and watched Charley and Ada come from the office, Ada going alone to the roulette room and Charley to the crap room in back.

He thought Charley didn't look good. His eyes shone too black and he walked too carefully, like someone drunk. He saw Charley stop in the doorway, pretending he wasn't looking at anything in particular. But Frieda knew why he had stopped and what he was looking at. It was the two strangers Sleigh had let in an hour ago. He knew Charley was sizing them up.

That was the kind of man Charley was, he thought. He could size up a stranger in a minute. He knew Charley didn't want any of the Chicago mobs coming into his place. He didn't want that kind of trouble. Frieda watched him, standing in the doorway and slowly scratching the back of his neck, and knew that already he had looked the men up and down and had made up his mind, whether they had ready money in their pockets and whether he trusted them in his place. He wondered what Charley was thinking—he would have given a good turkey dinner to know.

Charley was puzzled by the looks on the strangers' faces. It was a young look, too anxious and trustful. Though he was almost certain they could not be part of the Chicago mobs he was puzzled by the way they acted, too friendly and too nervous. He could not tell whether they meant it or not. It might just be put on. He was always careful of the hijacking sawed-off-shotgun Chicago gang and did not want them moving into his territory. He did things differently than they did. He did not want to be enemies with them, since no man in his right mind would want to be, but he certainly did not want to be friends with them.

He looked them over carefully again, swiftly, up and down, on the far side of the crap table, their heads swinging together like people watching a tennis match, right, left, right, left, as the dice sped from a man's hand, rolled, bumped, knocked against the boards, fell to rest. He watched

them without letting them know they were watched. At last he caught Rob's eye. Rob was raking in the game. No one could have seen Charley's quick jerk of his head, yet in a second Rob had handed the croupier's rake to Titanic and was coming toward Charley.

He looked directly at Rob. Rob reached for his handkerchief and began mopping his cheeks. He had a pointed, Christlike face but the look on it was wrong; he looked the way Christ would have looked had he been a thief. His eyes were never steady and his mouth kept working. His skin was moist and unhealthy. He looked worried before Charley even spoke to him.

"Who are those guys over there?" Charley asked.

Rob swung his head around, lifting his chin to pat his handkerchief beneath it. "What guys?"

"The two young fellas over there. Do you know them?"

"Oh. Them," Rob said with a gratey laugh, though there was nothing to laugh at. "No. I never saw 'em before."

"Who let 'em in? How come strangers can walk right into the place?"

Rob shrugged his narrow shoulders. "I didn't." Though they were brothers, he acted afraid. It gave Charley a pain. He knew how much Rob stole and never did anything about it, so there was nothing to be afraid of. So long as he never caught him, it would be all right; but it would be bad to have to catch his own brother stealing.

Charley looked away. "Sleigh must have let them in." Sleigh was a good dcorman and Charley trusted him. When he glanced up again, Rob was trying to grin as though he were not afraid of Charley. He had brittle, stained teeth which Charley knew were always the sign of a rotten no-good. He knew Rob did not like him because he had got where he was, while Rob had just trailed after hanging onto his shirttails.

Suddenly Rob was laughing out loud, a hiccuping thin laugh, unpleasant to hear. "You heard from Ma lately?"

Charley frowned. "No, I didn't hear from Ma. Why should I?" But the question had reminded him—he reached into his pocket for his money, beginning to peel off twenty-dollar bills to give Rob to send home to their mother.

Rob kept on laughing. "She wrote me. She said to tell you everything was O.K. on the farm; they raised a whole crop of ginseng this year."

Charley held the money in his hand. He watched Rob carefully, his eyes slightly narrowed, knowing there was something he had to tell because of the way he kept laughing, fainter now, still hiccuping thinly. "What else?" he asked.

"She said to tell you. You should stop sending her money, because she doesn't want any of your money." He looked with scorn down at Charley's hand. "She said she can get the neighbors to help work the farm and she doesn't want your money. She doesn't like where it comes from. All the money you've been sending her, she gave away to the Lutheran Church."

He kept laughing as though it were a funny joke he was telling Charley. The laugh went gratey, flashing a hard pain just behind Charley's eyelids. The pain swung across his temples and for a second he saw and felt black. The inner sides of his eyelids seemed to be painted a raw, coarse, painful black. He sank his hands into his pockets, thinking he would like to swing at Rob for making it a joke that their mother had shut him out because he was a gambler. She never forgave him for running away from the farm twenty years ago and becoming what he became. All the money he had been sending home lately she had given away to her church, trying to buy him absolution from his taint.

The pain vanished. He opened his eyes. "What's so funny

about that?" he asked, but held his voice in, steady and without any edge to it. But he looked squarely at Rob.

Rob's laugh faded away. His pallid face, with the flesh tight like an old man's, grew paler with his hate for Charley. His mouth tightened with his thirst for revenge. His greed for money and more money, and his envy of all the money Charley was making, shone from his eyes. "I thought it was funny," he whispered. "Ma thinks your dough's no good. She thinks it's dirty." He tried his laugh again but it was dead. "That was plenty dough you sent her. It went right from this place to the church."

Then his eyes were swinging again and little arcs of sweat came beneath them. He mopped his face, forgetting to use his handkerchief, using the palm of his bony hand.

"What are you so nervous about?" Charley asked.

"Who?" Rob looked surprised.

"You," Charley said, but then he did not even wait for his answer, his mind lurching away to think that this was his brother, the one he had played with on the floor of the green shady hickory grove, with whom he had led the horses to the spring on hot summer days, drenching their own overalls in the spring water to put down the heat. And thought of his mother, who had shut him out, and did not want his money because it was dirty. He felt dead, buried up on the hillside beside his father among the sumacs and pin cherries, his mother crawling up the hillside to him at last, a box of myrtle in her arms to plant on his grave, glad he was dead, glad she could pray for his poisoned soul.

He glanced up, a fire flashing in his black eyes. "Get back to your work," he told Rob. His contempt for Rob hurt his muscles. "Keep your eyes on those fellas. They look all right, but I'm not sure." He let his narrow gaze wander over toward them, trying to force down what he felt to-

ward his brother. "I'm not sure. I wish I knew who they were and how they got in. I wish I knew," he said.

Again wherever he went in the gambling house, from the crap table to the poker tables to the roulette table, he could see himself growing richer and richer. But now it was useless. He found himself wondering what he could do with all the money he was making. Lon did not want it, Paul did not want it, and his mother did not want it and soon he could not use it himself, but all his life he had chased for it. It was why his heart pounded and his blood raced. He could not understand why it had been at all. When he looked at the rich men pushing against the roulette table, the little gamblers, the cowards, the men who did not have the passion and the nerve, men to whom gambling was a little vice rather than a need like love, he could not help laughing, secretly, in scorn of all the money he kept taking away from them. He had an impulse to throw everything away. He felt a need to lose, the way all his life he had felt a need to win. The winning was empty now, not knowing that neither winning nor losing were important to him, but only the dice in his hand, the humming anguish of the blackjack players, the slap of cards, the hunted, breathless laughter, the smoke-filled air rife with the clatter of chips and the whisper of paper money and the nervous, anxious fingers, dealing swiftly, reaching, rapping on the table in tortured impatience; a game to play in; the pain in his blood while the cards were dealt, the roaring in his ears as the dice were rolled.

His guilt, because he was going to leave Lon alone, once they laid him away, kept growing. He had always thought someday he could make everything up to her, but now there was not going to be enough time. He was surprised, as he went back to the roulette room with its crowd of rich men,

how little there was left for him to love. Only Pete, who was more like his own son than Paul, droning above the wheel, his hair glossy under the pendent lamps, his hands white and well-cared for shooting the croupier's rake deftly out to the chips stacked on the numbers; and J. Walter Kersten and his friend Joe Joseph, the barber, both gray-haired, plump, of medium height; and across the table from them, Sarah Johnston, gambling with her high cackling laugh, tossing in chips without looking to see where they fell so that Ada, standing behind her, had to haul them in for her, saying "My God, Mother, watch what you're doing!"

The moment Jake died of pneumonia three winters ago, Sarah had shriveled up. She closed the house for the funeral and never opened it up again. She let the elegant rooms fall into disrepair until the night Charley held the royal flush, when the picture Sleigh had in his room was taken; then Charley rented the place from her, moving in the card tables and round poker tables and electric fans, the iron safe, the wheels, the crap tables and the loudspeaking equipment to hear the horse races right as they were run at the track.

Sarah looked much smaller now. Her shoulders were stooped. Her face was shriveled to an old woman's, bony and parched, though she still rouged and powdered it as much as before. The clusters of diamond grapes, with delicately curling gold tendrils, still hung on her tiny ears. But in three years she had aged twenty-five. Her body went frail and unsensual as a child's, yet she still wore the lavish dresses of earlier days, all her rings, bracelets, the jet bag crammed with bills dangling over her scrawny arm. She came with Ada in a closed car driven by the Filipino who used to be her porter. She liked to gamble at Charley's and reminisce in the room that used to be her reception room,

often losing a thousand dollars but never seeming to care. Jake was dead. She had nothing more to do with herself.

Glancing across from her, Charley saw Joe Joseph nibbling at a caramel bar. Frieda sold them as a sideline for himself when he was not busy carrying new decks of cards or dice to the tables, keeping the nickels and dimes in an old cigar box. The sight of Joe Joseph, chewing thoughtfully while he watched the wheel spin around, reminded Charley that he had eaten no supper. He felt a sudden sick hunger. It was after midnight. He had Sleigh order some chop suey from the Chinaman and then invited Sarah and Ada into his office to supper with him.

Sarah loved chop suey. Ada did not eat, and was drinking too much, looking strangely at Charley. Sarah's voice and laughter kept reminding him of the night he had first decided to open a gambling place of his own. He would glance at Ada then, remembering her—he was suddenly grateful that Lon never knew, not knowing that she knew. The young Chinaman, named Moy, who brought over the chop suey on his enormous tray was the same boy who brought Frieda and Sleigh their supper every night. He grinned at Charley, proud to be serving someone as important as Sarah and him. The chop suey place was just around the corner—years ago, soon after they were married, Charley had taken Lon there on his night off, where she gazed in wonder at the colored lanterns carved like dragons and boats but where she had been frightened of the soft-treading, soft-eyed waiters and had been so certain the food was unclean. Charley snorted, recalling it. Lon told him that Alice had said Chinamen put mice in their food.

Sarah turned her withered face up toward Moy as he served the chop suey. Even in age, there was something sunny on her face. "My God, boy," she cried, "watch what

you're doing! I don't want this Goddam Chineese slop spilled all over me!"

But she liked Moy. Then she gave out her high cackle of laughter. Her whole lower plate of teeth was solid gold, gleaming when she laughed. "Tip him good, Charley," she said, "he's a good boy." She turned her scrawny, hawklike face to Moy. "I knew your father, boy. He used to come to my house. Right here. He wasn't a piker—he liked a mulatto girl I had. Remember, Ada—remember the mulatto girl, Opal Griggs? Just listen to me, boy, your father was a good man! My God, I had a beautiful Chineese girl here—remember the Chineese girl, Ada? But he wouldn't take a look at her. He wanted the mulatto, Opal Griggs! These little Chinks can surprise you. Listen to me, boy—he was a good man!"

Moy bowed and grinned with proud, voluble delight. Charley tipped him well, laughing at Sarah's memories. But he ate almost none of the chop suey, though he had thought he was hungry. No food had taste any more; no appetite could ever be satisfied again. He looked at Ada, and how she kept watching him. And always through the closed office door he could hear the rattle of chips and silver dollars.

The wind fell away like something stunned and gave way to rain. When Lon left the movie house it was slanting down to the gutters, dripping from eaves and awnings, a steady unexpected rain. The avenue in the rain stretched long and tarnished. She did not remember how long she had sat in the movie house or where she wanted to go now. It was the first time she could remember having been downtown alone on a Saturday night.

So long as Charley was all right, she thought. She tried to recall what she had seen in the movie house but only the

dull, awful blankness of the screen stretched before her eyes. If anything were wrong with Charley . . . she thought, starting toward the parking lot where she had left the car. The rain left the streets sodden but with a fresh smell. She did not have an umbrella. She had to walk carefully, stepping over puddles already filling on the sidewalks.

When strangers looked up at her from under their umbrellas she looked quickly away. She never knew whether they were saying to each other, That's Charley King's wife, you know, the gambler. But she did not mind, though Paul did because he was young. He did not know his father yet. She kept her eyes on her feet. Dead leaves, old newspapers, the soggy lights falling through store windows lay on the sidewalk in the wet. At the parking lot she fumbled in her purse for a quarter and then another quarter to tip the attendant—Charley liked to see people tip well. She thought the quarter was a lot. Her fingers felt numb, searching in her purse. Then her eyes went numb as she drove down the wet streets. They ached from looking so intently through the windshield and the rain running in zig-zags down the glass and seeing nothing at all.

She crossed the bridges, the black river rushing snake-like underneath, gulping the rain that pelted down to its surface, rolling against the warehouses and the closed Kersten breweries along its banks. She could not see why things had to be this way. The world ought to be big enough for all decent people, for her own world of Charley and Paul. She tried to think if any of them had ever done wrong in their lives, the way Alice made it sound, that they were all sinners, like people who didn't take communion, but even Charley's gambling wasn't wrong, she knew. The quarrels between Charley and Paul were wrong but Paul would grow up, he would learn to have pride in his father, the kind of pride she had in both of them. She was proud of

Paul for learning so much more in college than she and Charley could ever learn. Paul was good and Charley was good, she thought as she drove over the bridges, so why did it have to be this way, why couldn't things be the right way? Her eyes burned from trying to figure it out.

As she turned down a side street, the black dripping trees shed rain like blossoms dropping. The street was deserted, an old and poor street with flimsy buildings and houses. It was a part of the city that people said was a disgrace and should be torn down. But she did not notice where she was. Rain, in an occasional gust of wind, kept flinging itself against the windshield. There was no sky, only blackness above. What had any of them done that was wrong? Why was it all turning out the way Alice had said all her life it would be, having a no-account husband like Charley who could not stay home decent at night with his wife and son? Why had Alice kept flogging them? Why was it all coming out as though Alice were right, she kept wondering, when she glanced through the rain-smeared window and found she was before Charley's place, the big dark secret-looking house in which she had never set foot, hidden down here among the dank buildings.

She stopped the car. She looked across the street to the big place. It looked dark and deserted. It frightened her—it was a place where there had been no life for years. For no light shone through the boarded windows, the place was empty, no one lived there or moved inside its walls, no breath had stirred in the rooms for years. But she knew what was inside, the noise and laughter and rattle of money and the foul, unhealthy air that clung to Charley's clothes.

She looked at the house with a curious, almost angry, bewilderment. She shivered, watching. She saw a man and woman, huddled under their umbrella, walk past the place. Suddenly they stopped—they stood back toward the curb,

gazing up at the place. They prowled about and stared at the building through the rain as though it were some famous, awe-inspiring relic. Lon knew why they stopped to look and whisper together and crane their necks toward the dark windows. They were telling each other what this place was, that once it had been Sarah Johnston's house but now it was Charley King's gambling joint, where God knows how many millions of dollars changed hands every night and God knew how many people probably got murdered. It was a shame the police didn't get after them all, all the drunkenness and murder and vice that went on in the place; it was a pity, poor men losing their earnings, being robbed, bled dry; it was a dirty rotten shame, it scared one to think what the world was coming to, it made one's eyes drop from their sockets to think how much money the cops must get to let such a place exist. Lon heard Alice's voice ringing clearly in her ears.

She watched the couple *prowl* away in the rain. The place stood so silent under the steady, glistening rain. Only a hall light burned dimly in the entrance—it was the only sign of life. But inside she knew was everything she hated and loved. She thought of Charley inside the place and all at once something leapt inside her, a sudden shaking knowledge of something—the certainty that had been growing all evening that something was wrong with him. It rose inside her until her face went white and she sat staring through the rain, afraid to move her blistering eyes for fear they would brim over. She could not say how she knew it. But she knew.

A humble look came in her eyes, of not knowing how to fight against such odds. Her lips began to tremble as she thought, Why should it have to happen, whatever it was that was going to happen, the thing that she knew now in her bones? With terrible clarity she recalled the drawn, sick

look on Charley's face of the last few weeks, the tortured pallor, the racking of his body that he never mentioned to her, his way of rushing suddenly from the room, some awful alarm shining on his face. She saw these things now with blinding clarity, while she thought again and again, Whatever it is that I know now I must never let him know. I must hold it all to myself. I'll make him go to a doctor, pretending it's nothing, and I'll make him do whatever the doctor says. It will be all right again.

Of course, she thought, suddenly laughing to herself. The doctor will make it all right because they know everything. You'll be all right, don't you worry, Charley, you'll be fit as a fiddle again, won't you?

The rain knocked steadily against the boarded windows of the crap room. But Rob did not hear it. His hands shook as one of the two strangers whom Charley told him to watch tossed over a ten-dollar bill and asked for ten silver dollars. He bet a dollar and Rob threw the dice over to him. The veins of Rob's bony hands stood out a sickly blue under the hanging lights. The nails were dirty and too long. He laughed gaspingly, waiting for the stranger to roll the dice. Little Bergson put a quarter on the line to bet the stranger would pass; he always gambled with quarters, never winning or losing much. He had a whole fistful of them that he carried around in an old salt bag and when he won, he tried to get Rob to pay him off in shiny new quarters. The new quarters glistened in Bergson's gnarled, gnome-like fingers as he dropped them or plucked them up from the line. The odor of the cigar store he owned always hung strongly around him. He was so little and shrunken that Charley always grinned and asked him, what was he going to do if he broke the bank someday, how was he ever going to carry all the quarters home?

The stranger rattled the dice. No one was betting much and so there was little excitement around the table. But a hush always fell when a man rolled the dice. The dozens of pairs of eyes watched like birds of prey as the ivory flash streaked across the sea of green felt.

"Let 'em roll, boys," Rob said, swinging a nervous, strained glance around the table.

There was a mild murmur. No one paid much attention as the stranger threw the dice, caught a seven, and won his first dollar bet right off.

CHAPTER FIVE

SARAH, reminiscing through her chop suey, liked to recall the men who had come to her house years ago, proud of the fine clientele she once had. Every one of the rich, genteel men she met in the roulette room at Charley's place she would try to identify through his father or grandfather or brother or uncle, as she did with Moy.

She wiped up the last of the chop suey on her plate with a piece of roll and was ready to gamble again. Charley and Ada took her back to the wheel room, where she had left all her chips uncounted on the table, but where they still stood untouched. She looked shrewdly up at the man who had moved into the place next to hers. He had just come in, a tall man named Richardson, and she tried to place him, trying to recall whether he had ever come to her house.

Charley introduced them. He could not keep the distaste from his face while he said, "Sarah, meet Tracy Richardson." Sarah rolled the name over in her mind.

"My God, yes—I knew your grandfather!" Sarah nodded, her eyes smiling her tired pleasure. "I knew him as well as I knew my own! Sam Richardson was a lovely man—why, he used to be here every night right in this room where you're standing now! He was always polite to the girls," she said.

"Samuel J. Richardson was my great-uncle. I hardly knew him," the man said coldly.

"Is that so? Why, he used to come here to call on me as

regular as clockwork, the minute the logging season ended. Good God, he'd come in here bellowing for half a dozen girls at once, a beautiful man. But he was always lovely to them. He liked apple pie for his breakfast. Your grandfather was crazy for apple pie."

"My great-uncle," the man said.

"One morning we forgot the apple pie and he blew the roof off! I had to send from one end of town to the other, hunting up an apple pie at six in the morning! But he was a gentleman," Sarah said, "a lovely man."

"I don't remember him very well," the man said.

Sarah gave out her dry tinkle of laughter. He kept running his fingers nervously up and down his stack of chips. "God-almighty, you should have seen him on the night of the old Essex House fire," Sarah said. "He had Birdie Sutton with him for company—you remember Birdie, Ada, she came to work for me after the fire?—and while he was up in the room with her, the fire broke out. Well, that day he'd just bought himself a new hat, one of those cowboy hats he paid forty dollars for. He was a lovely gentleman and got a new hat for Birdie, too. It had a bird of paradise, it must have cost close to two hundred dollars! So as soon as they start to yell *fire*! Birdie ran out of the room, and Sam comes running after! 'Here, don't forget your hat!' he yells. Finally when they get outside, there they are standing on the sidewalk, your grandfather and Birdie Sutton, both of them stark naked and him with his cowboy hat sitting on top of his head and Birdie with the bird of paradise on hers!"

The man to whom Sarah spoke smiled uncomfortably, while the other men around the table laughed in frank surprise at his discomfort. Charley snorted at the man's secret outrage. He was surprised again at what contempt he had for these rich men who kept making him richer,

gambling and all the while knowing nothing about how to gamble, gambling without ecstasy, their ears locked to the magical click-clack of the ivory ball as it sped, hopped, plopped around the grooved wheel.

A desire to laugh was growing in him. His face was drawn and white. Sleigh came by with a tray of drinks from which Ada plucked another, the highball shaking gently in her hand. At the roulette table, Sarah had dropped a twenty-dollar chip on a number without looking to see where it fell. Then the ball clicked and clacked again, fell in its groove and next Charley saw a frown cross Pete Senta's brow. Sarah had won; he was counting out over seven hundred dollars for her. Her rouged and veined childlike cheeks were cracked with her surprised laughter.

"What's the matter?" she cried, her brittle voice mixing with the clatter of the chips Pete was stacking before her, "What are you giving me all this for?" She pushed half the stack toward Ada. "Here, girl—I don't want all these damned things! For God's sake, Charley, look what they're giving me. This damn fool Senta's giving your place away. Here—" and she tossed a twenty-dollar chip over to Charley—"send this over to the Chiney boy that brought the chop suey—my God, I knew his father thirty years ago!" She kept laughing in childish, unbelieving surprise.

Richardson had moved to the other side of the table, away from her, and held his face rigid as he watched the chips being stacked in front of her. She tossed another twenty-dollar chip over to Joe Joseph the barber. She liked the barber. "Here—go get yourself a haircut!" Charley enjoyed seeing her win, knowing that within half an hour he would win the seven hundred back from the rich insolent men who crowded around the table.

The pain drew his cheeks to a glistening chalkiness.

Watching the crowd around the table only made him wonder again at the fury of his life. Even Lon, he was making himself believe, would have been better off without him. He saw Ada watching him, her eyes filled with an empty patience. He turned abruptly on his heel and left the room. He was sinking into some kind of hollow from which he could not lift himself out.

Paul stood in the doorway of the speakeasy with Esther Rosnik. He was too tall and too thin. He tried to keep his hair combed but it fell on his high forehead. His scarf dangled from inside his coat. He had a wild, arrogant glitter in his eyes and stood there smiling in the doorway, his face pale, his nostrils arching. His lean animal cheeks were Charley's but the light hair was Lon's. His smile was somewhat strained, the tips of his white teeth showing, an insolence in his glance as he looked down at Esther. He looked like someone who owned the place. His expensive clothes, the pale blue fine wool scarf, helped his arrogance, as though he were a little better than anyone else in Magglioni's. Only his twitching fingers and an occasional tremble of the corner of his mouth gave him away.

He hung his trench coat beside the door, a coat slightly more expensive than the ones the other boys wore. Magglioni's parlor was crowded with the wine and beer drinkers. He led Esther to a table, his smile curling in his pale face, his long arm held out to protect Esther from the crowd, his contempt for these other young people, as well as for Magglioni, plain. Only by looking closely could anyone have seen the wretchedness in his eyes or the fright behind the too-set smile. He tried to look bored at being there. The cloths on the tables were soiled with spaghetti sauce or rings from the bottles of spiked beer or splotches of the homemade wine like faded crimson flowers. Esther's

full dark lips were laughing; she too had to hide her discomfort because of her plain clothes. They were as cheap as his were expensive. At the table, she felt his long leg bump against hers. Then his eyes dropped and she saw color run swiftly over his face. She looked where he had been looking and saw Elizabeth Kersten, the rich brewer's daughter.

They did not know where to look. They felt out of place, because he was a gambler's son and she was poor. He laughed, talked rapidly, but his eyes kept lurching toward Elizabeth Kersten in the corner; his longing was so plain. Magglioni, big and bull-like, came into the room, glaring at his customers. Esther was glad to have someone to look at. Magglioni roared at the room. They weren't going to get noisy, he hoped. They were going to be ladies and gentlemen. He hoped they wouldn't act like last week, playing the radio too loud, begging for the cops. He didn't allow necking and he wasn't going to sell them any booze. College kids were fine, he liked them, but beer was good enough for them, such young kids, or the homemade wine. Please not to call it Dago Red, it wasn't a nice word. He pushed around the room giving instructions and telling the crowd how to act and halted to straighten the fringed crêpe-paper shade on one of the lamps before he went out again.

Esther raised her eyes, looking at Paul, in love with his pale skin and hair and fiercely white teeth flashing at her in the dim light. She was in love with every part of him. For the few years they had known each other they had leaned heavily on one another, because they had so few other friends. When they were alone, she knew he loved her. It was in public, here at Magglioni's, that she lost him. His smile went arrogant and she could feel all his muscles trembling. She saw him longing to be with girls like Elizabeth Kersten.

When he had called for her, she had not been afraid. He came in noisily, and for a second she was not ashamed of the squalid house she lived in. She was home alone. He was in high spirits, with something hilarious racing through his arms and legs. She was glad her mother was not there, fat, always working, and always not getting anything done; or her father, a short man with dirty fingernails. The house was always messy with newspapers or candy boxes or half-eaten sandwiches on plates. She had cleaned the living room to make it look good for Paul. She took out her mother's cut-glass bowl and put it on a table, giving out a fleck of laughter as she polished the bowl until it sparkled. Her soft cheeks burned. She would not mind being poor, if Paul did not envy everyone who was rich and respectable. She dusted the keys of the upright piano and blew the motey dust from the ribbon lamp shades.

When he came in, he was whistling some hunted, wild song under his breath. It made everything good, she forgot what she was and his helpless anger at being what he was. He stood in the middle of the room, tall, his pale blue scarf dangling from his thin neck. He laughed. "You look good," he said. "Let's go someplace."

The words sounded young and full from his mouth. She shook back her black hair, laughing. She loved the zestful words with which the college crowd spoke. She wished she could have gone to college with him. Good. You look good, he said. He looks keen. He's neat. I'm a neat-looking girl, I wish he'd say that. All the sweet words the rich bright girls and laughing boys used with each other. You're swell. She's a sweet one. You're keen. She was laughing softly, a flush of red on each cheek.

"You're keen." He smiled at her, holding her coat. He had not noticed the mend on the shoulder. "We'll take a ride and then go down to Magglioni's with the bunch."

When she turned around he kissed her, not gracefully but hard, the way young people kiss, with abrupt clumsiness tipping her body backward, her black hair shaking, his long legs apart to get his stance and his own body tipped slightly sidewise, with a fierce grip as though there were some pain in it. He had his eyes squeezed tightly shut. The sweet words, she breathed to herself, keen, neat, you're neat-looking, you're sweet, God, you're a sweet one. He was whispering to her, something scarcely audible but it held the meaning of all the good college words. She knew he loved her and her heart sang. He was as happy with her in the quiet house as he could be anywhere with a keen girl like Elizabeth Kersten. The ones he envied, the ones he worshiped; in that same way she knew he loved her too. He would know it someday too, when the pain passed and the time came that it did not matter who was rich or poor, when his eyes were opened. She waited desperately.

But once in Magglioni's, she lost him again. No matter how often they came to the speakeasy, they never had a feeling of being there. Paul's eyes looked around hungrily. He kept talking rapidly. The crowd was mostly from the college. They had money to spend, the young students. The girls were in short soft dresses and the boys all wore trench coats as they came in. They were eager, impatient, laughing wisely with one another. Magglioni's was their favorite hangout—they made his crowded parlor fashionable. They moved like droves of bees from one place to another, settling there for a few weeks or a month, sucking it dry, moving on to another speakeasy. All at once it would be deserted; overnight another place would become jammed.

But now it was Magglioni's, in the ward, a cellar place. It was small but sweet smelling with the wine and *antipasto* Mrs. Magglioni served. Mrs. Magglioni, mouselike, black-haired and black-eyed, served the food. She looked religious

and always frightened. "What's the matter?" she would cry out to her husband. "Why don't they eat the spaghetti?" She hovered behind the young people's chairs, her small beady eyes, with their faintly swollen lids, almost lost in humility and chagrin. She stared down at the full plates before the girls. "What's the matter with the spaghetti?—they don't eat it! Everything is clean," she said to her husband in Italian, her voice frail with despair. She kept speaking in Italian about the young people as though they were not there, pointing to a mustached Italian against the wall, eating noisily. "See—Rallazzi eats it!" she chirped in triumph. "Everything is clean," she repeated, though no one had said it wasn't.

But the young people, locked safely away from the rain outside, had no hunger for anything but the beer and wine and each other. They ordered food because they had money to spend. But they let it grow cold on their plates. Paul looked jerkily around the room, at all the girls and young men. They could laugh freely and had proud glows on their cheeks.

But Paul could not make himself fit in. He suddenly noticed the mend on the shoulder of Esther's coat and a thin shame crawled on his face. He clamped his teeth together. He laughed contemptuously toward Elizabeth Kersten in the corner; he made the laugh sound as if he were too good for her crowd. A fierce longing hung in his eyes, but always behind his eyelids he saw his father, spoiling everything, smelled the foul smoke odor that clung to his clothes, heard the dull stories about men with nicknames like Titanic, saw his black hat and silk shirts.

He had never been to his father's place or he might have understood him better. He did not even know that Magglioni, for instance, knew his father, and went to gamble at the big place every night after he closed the cellar speak-

easy, and that sitting in a poker game with Charley until the thin morning light seeped through the cracks of the boarded windows was the finest thing Magglioni knew. This Charley King, Magglioni said along with the other men, was a great fella, the finest there was. Someday he was going to come down and let Mrs. Magglioni cook him a spaghetti dinner. That would be a fine day, Magglioni roared, *Madonna mia*, this Charley King was a great one. He treated his customers like humans should be treated. He gave a man twenty dollars for taxi fare home after he lost all his money; no man ever left his place broke; he could play poker like he made up the rules himself. There was no beating a man like Charley King, who was going to come down to this cellar hole someday to let the Mrs. cook him the biggest spaghetti dinner a man ever ate.

All Paul knew, down in Magglioni's cellar, was how much he wanted to be with the girls like Elizabeth Kersten, whose father was rich and owned the brewery, or the boys with their pipes and smooth jackets. His clothes cost as much as theirs did. He had a Peerless roadster parked outside, glossy in the rain, that his father had bought for him, though there was no one to ride in it laughing and singing. He thought of friendships he made, suddenly ended, or dates with girls at the last minute broken. And he thought of the loaded question that was always asked, at parties or dances, What does your father do? and the numbness that struck his tongue. He thought of his mother, in some puzzled way flaring at him, her cheeks pinched with her sudden defensive and humiliated rage, Wasn't his father good enough for him? What more could anyone do for a boy than his father did? Where did he get so high and mighty? an angry crystal drop hanging on her lashes, until his own face went white with shame, knowing how he was

hurting her, for he loved his father but did not understand him. He wanted to understand him but the wall was there.

Charley was standing in front of the mirror that Sleigh had bought at the dime store to give the hallway a dressed-up air. The glass rippled like water into which a pebble was cast but Sleigh kept its surface gleaming with ammonia. Charley leaned to the right a little, to catch his reflection where the glass was more level, and adjusted the diamond stickpin in his tie. The stickpin no longer seemed large or expensive. But he always wore it. He never explained when people asked why, knowing he could afford a much bigger, showier one. But he was afraid not to wear it, for fear it might change his luck. He was screwing the safety lock more tightly on the underside of the tie, squinting because of the poor light, when Pete Senta came up to him.

Charley's eyebrows went up. "Who's taking care of the wheel?"

"I put Titanic on. He wasn't busy."

"Titanic's a good wheel man but he can't count fast enough. He doesn't pay off fast enough to suit the customers."

Pete wasn't listening. "It's a funny thing Rosnik hasn't come in yet tonight," he said.

Pete was a worrier by nature, Charley always told him. He was too young to worry so much. He could lose his last dollar in a fat poker pot without blinking his eyes, but he worried about a customer who hadn't been in for a night or two or whether his fingernails looked neat and his shoes polished. He went crazy with worry when his mother, Pearl, who was enormous and so healthy they said doctors started to run after one look at her, gave off even the tiniest sneeze. He made her quit the poker game right away, take a dose of fruit salts and go home.

"He wasn't in last night," Pete said, "and I figured maybe he wasn't feeling well. But it's a funny thing he hasn't come in tonight."

"If he wasn't feeling good last night, maybe he isn't feeling good tonight," Charley grinned. "You worry too much. You'll worry yourself right into the grave."

But Pete's forehead remained creased. He held his bright eyes down to the floor as though he expected to find some reason down there why Rosnik had not come in. He didn't trust men like Rosnik. It worried him. There had been trouble with Rosnik before. He looked up suddenly, his thin mouth pursed. He had just thought of something. "It's still early," he said. "He might still come in." He looked pleased, because he had thought of it.

"What's the difference?" Charley asked. "I don't like him. I'm glad when he stays away."

Pete had another thought. His lower lip jutted slightly with his laughter. "Maybe he's broke."

"Maybe he is," Charley grinned. "He's been losing for three weeks steady."

Pete worried again. "He lost last time. That's what caused the trouble."

"I like to see a man like that lose," Charley said. "It does me good. He hasn't got a right to be in an honest gambling joint. Ten years ago, before I had a place of my own, he beat me out of six hundred in a stud game. He was in cahoots with the dealer and the dealer kept flashing the cards to him. I'll never forget the way Rosnik laughed when he took all my money." Charley rubbed his hand thoughtfully on the back of his neck. "I like to see a man like that lose."

It was why he had let him back into the place a month ago, even after the trouble a year ago, he thought. Because he liked winning his money back, no matter how long ago.

he had lost it. A man who was an honest gambler always came out ahead in the end. He liked to see the men who dealt crooked end up broke. It was right. It was his belief like the beliefs of people who went to church.

"It still worries me," Pete said. His violent, unreasoned hate for Rosnik flashed on his face. He flicked his hand over his oiled hair. "He'll lose all his money and there'll be trouble again. How much has he dropped?"

"About four thousand. No more."

"That's a lot for Rosnik."

"That's the interest on my six hundred."

"That's good interest," Pete said, beginning to laugh, his admiration for Charley plain on his face. "That's good enough," he laughed silently, until it became a wonderful joke to him. He tipped his head suddenly toward the boarded windows. "It's raining like hell outside." He saw Charley take out his watch, half-lidding his eyes to see the time and then winding the stem carefully and slowly; and so he half-lidded his eyes and took out his watch, winding the stem carefully, slowly. "One-nineteen," he said, as he went back to his wheel.

Charley watched after him. He enjoyed talking things over with Pete; when things went bad, they didn't seem so bad. He wondered whether Pete was right, worrying about Rosnik. He remembered what Ada had told him. He saw Ada watching one of the blackjack games. She was getting drunk. He could tell by the way her hair curled out of place against her cheeks and by the faint steady smile she kept on her lips. She did not talk, only smiling her faint smile at the men as they said hello to her. The place was jamming up; more and more men said hello to Ada. The place was so crowded, there was so much money rattling on the tables, all money for him, so much smoke crawling gray-blue through the air, that Frieda had to sit

in as dealer in one of the poker games. Everyone itched to throw away his money, they couldn't get into the games fast enough. Frieda sat with his green eyeshade pulled down low over his eyes, his thick stubs of fingers dealing the cards one by one, slowly and grimly, now and then licking his thumb.

The few thousand Rosnik had lost meant nothing, there was so much other money on the tables. He remembered when Rosnik had lost a year ago. He lost no more than a few hundred, but on the next day Rosnik's wife was down at the place to see him. She was plump and looked greasy. She was poorly dressed but right off Charley guessed she had put on her worst dress, her oldest shoes and stockings to come down and see him. She smelled of a cheap, sickly toilet water. Her plump hands were folded in her lap, the red thumbs sticking up like two crooked poles. When she began talking, it was like something she had memorized. She said Rosnik had lost a thousand dollars, the place was crooked, she was going to the police, and she wanted the money back.

"Rosnik didn't lose no thousand dollars," Charley said.

She said Christmas was coming soon and what kind of Christmas were their children going to have, with no money to buy them even ten-cent-store presents? Oh Christ, Charley thought, these bastard crooks; Rosnik put her up to this, he's probably waiting outside to grab the money from her when she comes out. He looked at Mrs. Rosnik patiently. He explained slowly that Rosnik had only lost a few hundred and that the place was honest; a man shouldn't gamble if he can't afford to lose. Mrs. Rosnik shifted her body, letting loose a whole wave of her cheap toilet water.

She could go to the police, she smiled, as though she were doing Charley a favor. Her smile was fixed on her loose lips. She could, Charley said. "It don't look so good, when

those things come out in the paper," she said. Charley's face went hard, glazed with his contempt not for her but for Rosnik. He looked at her carefully. She did not look mean, but just stupid. She had her pale round mouth shaped, ready to ask a question. Wasn't he going to give her back the thousand dollars?

Then she looked a little worried. No, ma'am, he wasn't going to give her a red cent. She looked surprised, and then suddenly scared. She was blushing. Her fat cheeks got shamed spots of red on the dry, cracking flesh. His son Paul, that was a nice boy, she said. She said it stupidly, like lines she had been coached to say. What in hell did his boy Paul have to do with this? Charley asked. He felt his voice raging; she was crazy; he didn't know what she was talking about. But suddenly his eyes were glaring, his blood pounded raw inside him— What was she talking about? His boy Paul, she said, he took out her girl Esther sometimes. They were in high school together. They went to the prom.

He began to laugh sickly. It was a big joke. He was shaking all over. When he looked at Mrs. Rosnik, she was dead white, her lips soft and flabby with shame. He felt sorry for her. She looked like a good woman whom someone had made a whore. He never saw anyone before hating herself so much as she was. Rosnik had made her come. Her plump hands were gripping each other, each one making a tomb for the other. But he opened the safe and handed her ten one-hundred dollar bills. As she rolled up the money and put it in her torn purse she did not look at it, but he knew how it felt in her hands, it felt like dirt, it felt like filth, it felt like worms that were going to eat away inside her all the rest of her life.

Paul laughed. He let his arrogant gaze rove over Maggioni's, to the boys along the bar in the corner, their heads

tipped back, the beer bottles like trumpets in their hands, their laughter loud between swallows. He saw Elizabeth Kersten drinking the red sweet wine from a cup. All around him was laughter, something comfortable in it, against the rain outside. The room smelled steamy. Water trickled from the trench coats to the floor, so that Mrs. Magglioni had to keep rubbing her carpets to prevent them from staining.

It was the wonderful beginning of life, the boys along the bar often laughed secretly, their faces breaking over something they told each other. The boys with dates felt a hot possession toward their girls, all of whom had grace in their bodies, even the ones who were not pretty, a young, unspoiled ease of movement. When the girls went off in pairs to the washroom they came back whispering to each other about the boys they were with and called them neat, keen, cute, swell, an expectancy burning on their mouths. They stood aside politely, still with respect for the older world, as Magglioni raged by with a tray of beers.

They shook their short-bobbed hair and laughed into their wine. The smoke was thick. Esther knew some of the boys, the ones without dates along the bar. She had known them in high school. They were the kind who didn't date much; they were working their way through college or were athletes, supposed to be in training, or were boys still without the nerve to take out a girl. They were not as well dressed as the boys with dates. Their clothes made them look harder; their arms were thick in their bright red sweaters. But among themselves they kept laughing, the beer bottles clamped in their strong hands, their heads tipping again and again.

She noticed how Paul was drinking, rapidly, taking long swallows like the boys at the bar. But then her eyes dropped, afraid to look at him. For she could hear them and she did

not want him to hear. She thought that by locking her own ears she could blot out the words. . . . She could seal Paul's ears too, so he could not hear what they were saying at the bar. . . .

"What'll we do now?" "Let's go to Charley King's," one of them said abruptly, breaking into laughter. Then they all laughed, enviously, a little in embarrassment—it pleased them too much. "Charley King's? Why, they clip you in there, Jesus! That's a big joint." They looked at each other feverishly. "I'd like to go to Charley King's place. Christ, I'd like to go! I've got five bucks in my pocket. . . ." "They'll get it away from you fast enough, they're all hijackers!" but they laughed, swallowing beer to cover their excitement. "Well, let's go, why don't we try? Wouldn't it be keen? I bet they'll let us in, they'll let us in if we've got dough to take from us," they said, knowing they wouldn't go. They couldn't get in, they wouldn't dare to go, but they would have liked to try. They would have given anything to get into a place like Charley King's.

But Paul heard them.

"Oh, I'd like to go all right. It would be keen," they said to each other, their faces strained, like suddenly older, wiser faces. "Charley King's place used to be Sarah Johnston's. I'll bet they've still got—" "What?" they asked. "Oh, Christ, as though you don't know!" "No, honest to God, what?" "Christ, you've been in every hookshop in this town, you know about Sarah Johnston's—" "But not any more," they said, "they don't have girls at Charley King's. I'll bet a buck they don't," they said, sounding as though they would like to lose the bet, they were really going to Charley King's and they were going to be disappointed not to find any girls there after they'd broken the bank. They snorted wisely. "O.K., let's go to Charley King's, Jesus, wouldn't you like to? It's a big joint. God, I'll bet they clip

you plenty!" They made it sound a pleasure to be clipped.

Paul could not hear the envy in their voices. He could not hear, because he deafened himself on purpose, how they would have given half their lives to be a man like Charley King. Inside himself he began to fight, his father, the boys at the bar, Esther, Elizabeth Kersten, everything around him. His hair fell over his forehead, clinging damply, his face paled and the sharp teeth bit on his lip, though his body did not move.

His nerves pulled tight. Then he looked at Esther. He gave her a sharp, wild laugh and winked at her. She could think he had not heard them. He pushed his long, thin leg against hers. He was feeling drunk from the spiked beer. He glanced over to Elizabeth Kersten and felt blinded, for he thought she was beginning to smile at him, so that he swung his head quickly away. Esther had a smile fixed on her lips. He thought she looked like a deafmute, the way she sat there, smiling at him. He tried to talk but the pain hollered in his throat.

"Would you like to go someplace else?" Esther asked. "I don't like it here."

He nodded. They began to leave but when they passed the bar one of the boys stopped Esther. Paul held his throat so tight all his muscles were tangled. He could not hear what Esther and the boy were saying; he could only hear sounds, soft and afraid, from Esther's lips. He saw the boy smile and Esther smile and then words came at last, plainly from Esther's mouth, "This is Paul King."

The boy held out his hand. He laughed easily, though Paul could not hear the friendliness that was in it. "King?" he heard, and did not catch the pleased astonishment, "you're not related to this guy we were just talking about, Charley King?"

"No," Paul said.

"I thought he might be your dad," the boy said.

Paul, in one second, saw his mother sitting home alone nights, husbandless, saw his father, and his own jail-like life, all flash across his brain. The pictures were flames, burning inside his head. Then with the denial came the need to strike out, to fling his arms. It was senseless, swinging his long arm into the line at the bar. But for one second he fought wildly.

It took only that long for Magglioni to hoist him up, carry him toward the door and throw him out, a strange sight, since Paul was so tall and his legs kicked so. In that second he could hear the roaring laughter and it seemed that Elizabeth Kersten's roared loudest against his throbbing eardrums. Magglioni, a moment later, opened the door again to fling out his blue scarf. Esther picked it up from the wet sidewalk. Magglioni watched after them, holding the door open several inches. He saw the boy and girl running toward the roadster, the girl hanging onto him, like something she was afraid to lose. They were alone again, locked out. At the car the boy stopped, with sudden blind laughter raising her fingertips to his lips.

Magglioni looked out. He had heard the boy at the bar ask if he was Charley King's son. No, that couldn't be Charley's kid, he thought. He had heard Charley talk about his boy. No. A boy like that couldn't be a boy of Charley's. The rain blew in on him, a thin spray on his brightly striped shirt. Anyway, the kid said so himself that he wasn't, and he closed the door on the gusts of rain.

Paul took Esther home. Then he kept driving on the wet, sucking streets. He curled his mouth when a gust of rain blew against the windshield. The wiper stuck but he did not stop to fix it. A dead leaf clung under the wiper, jamming it. The rain washed in a rippled sheet over the

glass. He had never been to the big place before, and he did not know why he was going now. He did not know what, but there was something final he had to tell his father.

He was surprised how dark the place looked. Six wide steps went up to the doorway, behind which the hall light burned. The darkness and the single light made it seem like leaving this world, entering another. Inside the hallway it was warm. He brushed the rain from his narrow shoulders, from his hair. The cold rain still stung on his cheeks and left them like marble. His teeth flashed as he went toward the thick metal door. He went up quickly and pushed the bell. It was little different from the way you got into Magglioni's. He laughed angrily at this secret, hiding, sniveling world he was going to enter.

It was Sleigh who lifted the cover on the peephole. He always raised it in joy, but also in fear that someday his single glazed eye would shine through the hole on the cops or the Chicago mob. This time all he saw was a boy, his trench coat collar swung up angrily about his ears.

"You can't come in," Sleigh said. All of a sudden he felt important. He grinned. "I ain't going to let you in, I don't know you." Charley would be pleased, the way he took care of that door. "You beat it," Sleigh grinned, proud of himself. "I ain't going to let you in if you wait there ten years."

"I'm Charley King's son," Paul said.

"Ho!" Sleigh laughed.

"You'd better let me in," Paul said. Then he brought out his driver's license, holding it up for the single eye to see.

Like magic the door swung open. Paul went inside. The bright cones of light falling from the hanging lamps hurt his eyes, with the darkness and thick smoke above them. A few men peered up from under their hats when he came in, their brows beetled and eyes strained from the glare of

the lights. Sleigh just looked at him, happier than ever before. The richness of the rooms startled him, the heavy drapes over the blank windows and the shining parquet floors; and the crowds, the men pushing against each other, the groups around tables, framed in the hot yellow light, the men hunched, leaning forward on their chairs, their itching, praying hands clenched over the white-topped tables; and the cries from the blackjack table, "Hit me—go on, hit me!" the strident, defiant laughter and the roar of the electric fan and the slapping of cards, the curses from the poker tables, "A six spot, oh Christ—all right, you bastard, so you deal me a Goddamn ten!"—the thudding and hum from the crap room "Oh baby, baby, baby! . . ."—the drone from the roulette room, a slick crooning voice, "All right, ladies and gentlemen, no more bets—here we go!" and the rocking laughter and explosions of rage or the rapping of the rain on the blind windows through which no one could see.

It was Frieda who recognized him. He raised his black holes of eyes, jerked his chunky head and snapped his eye-shade back from his forehead. He tossed down the deck of cards. He took lumbering steps toward Paul.

"Charley's boy," he said through his heavy, sleepy lips. And "Who? This kid? He's Charley's boy?" someone else asked loudly, smiling at Paul. Pete Senta shot a glance from the roulette room, hearing the name, a look both amazed and pleased. They all looked up in wonder. Sleigh was helping him off with his coat and brushing the raindrops from the sleeves, not caring where they fell. "So you're Charley's boy? Well, for God's sake. Titanic, look—this is Charley's boy."

"This boy here?" they asked, glancing up from their cards. "This the boy going to college now? Your name's Paul, isn't it?" They seemed to know all about him, these

men who were his father's friends. "Say, Ada—I want you to meet Charley's kid!" "He looks like him," the woman smiled. They put their hands on his shoulder. "No kidding? Is this Charley's boy?"

He looked at the men, puzzled. They seemed to think he was wonderful, just because he was Charley's son.

CHAPTER SIX

IT WAS

about two o'clock. In the hallway of the big place a pool of water was seeping under the front door from the steady rain. The customers tracked it into the place and kept Sleigh busy, following them with his mop. Stuck to one customer's heel he saw a cigarette coupon, flapping like a yellow tongue. He followed it until the coupon slipped off, then stooped to get it for Frieda. He took it to the electric fan and dried it in the breeze. He had almost twenty in his pocket; it was a good night. He took out his big watch and looked at it, holding it sideways to get rid of the glare from the swinging lights. Usually around two-thirty he went out to get Frieda a half dozen hamburgers, but it was only two o'clock. He went on mopping near the metal door, being careful not to splash a drop on the customers' shoes. He kept telling himself Charley would kill him, if he splashed so much as one drop.

In the crap room, little Bergson was still betting his quarters. It was a cinch, he thought greedily. He had been gambling for twenty-five years but he had never had a cinch like this. His wiry body was shaking as his gnarled, child-sized fingers kept grabbing for the quarters he won. It was like taking candy from a baby. He plopped out his quarter, watched the dice roll, gave a little snigger and like magic two quarters rolled back to him over the sea of green felt. His brownish face grew bloated with the luck he was having.

For all he did was to bet along with the two strangers. He put his quarter on the line, betting that they would pass. Each time one of the two strangers won, Bergson won. And he won on almost every roll. A few of the other crapshooters had cashed in their chips and were leaning against the table in silence, watching the unusual run of luck of the two men. They were already six or seven hundred dollars ahead. Each time they won they would give a soft hiccup of laughter; they had the perpetual surprise of new gamblers. They had not known it was so easy to make money—you just shoveled it in, you scraped up the chips with both hands—their pockets would bust with all the money. The timid mistrust with which they had begun was gone. Something began to tingle in their fingers, flow in their blood and glint in their eyes. Often, as they collected their bets, they would glance with a quick grin down the table to Rob.

Rob was sweating. He was working hard. Several times he had turned the cashbox and dice over to Titanic while he rushed out to the water cooler to swallow a dose of sodium bicarbonate. But he was never gone long, only for one or two rolls of the dice. The croupier's rake, as he poked it clumsily across the table, was sticky and wet in his hand. He changed the dice often. Usually when a run of luck started they changed the dice after every player. But he was not changing the dice as often as Charley would have changed them. He blew his nose, then dropped his handkerchief as he fumbled to get it back into his pocket. After that he kept wiping his moist bony palms on his shirt front, rubbing hard, as though he had a pain in his chest.

He tried not to look nervous. The men had begun betting ten dollars at a crack. He would laugh at nothing at all, his lower lip drooping away from his unclean teeth, a grating laugh as he paid off the bets, or tossed in new dice, or when

he saw Frieda shuffle into the room. He never talked to Frieda. Almost no one ever talked to Rob, though he never noticed it. When he saw Frieda shuffle into the room on his carpet-slipped feet, his collar button gleaming from the front of his collarless shirt, Rob swung his eyes to watch him. Frieda was only looking for Charley to tell him his boy was here. But when Rob saw him, the raspy laughter dropped from his lower lip.

"Murder!" Rob called with a thin smile to Frieda from the head of the crap table. "I'm getting murdered, Frieda. These two guys are taking me for a ride. They're cleaning me!" He sounded anxious to talk to someone.

It was the kind of banter Charley used with the customers when he was losing; it made the customers feel good, and gave them something extra for their money so they'd want to come again. Frieda looked up at Rob with lazy surprise in his pin points of eyes. Rob sounded almost friendly.

He changed the dice again as Frieda came near the table. But also, as he changed them with a flick of his fingers that he had been practicing for a long while, he tossed in the right dice, Charley's dice, an honest pair, not the crooked dice he had been slipping to help his friends, the two strangers, clean out his brother Charley's bankroll, the way they had planned it together for weeks.

Everyone was looking for Charley. "It's the kid," Pete Senta explained to Sarah Johnston. He pursed his lips. "Charley's kid just came into the place, but no one can find Charley. He's gone again."

Sleigh was passing a new tray of highballs. "I know where he went," he said, already beginning to believe what he was going to say. "He went home to get some fish poles. In the morning, when we close up the place, he's going to take us up north fishing. Him and Frieda and me, sure he is."

Frieda came out from the crap room, his eyeshade

dangling from his hand. His tiny holes of eyes blinked slowly in the flesh of his face, fluttered with ache and strain. "I can't find him," he said. "I looked in the office and in the washroom."

Sleigh answered a knock on the door. "Charley isn't here," he said, glancing only for a second through the peephole at the man who had tried several times before to get in. Sleigh wandered away.

Paul stood waiting for his father. The men eyed him secretly. They went up to him. "We can't find him," Pete Senta said. "That's the second time today he disappeared." Pete tried to be friendly, because he was the nearest to Paul's age. But his face felt tight and he colored. It was something about the way Paul looked around him, as though he was too good to be here; it was the angry sneer he saw on Paul's lips, not knowing how frightened he was. Pete felt he was only a kid. "So you're Charley's boy," he said, "he talks a lot about you. You're plenty smart, he says. He says you're in college now."

Paul looked puzzled. He could not understand the way they clung around him. "Charley's got a fine boy," Sleigh said happily, looking at him. "I'll bet he takes him up north fishing with us!"

Frieda looked at him cautiously, thinking he needed more weight.

"You play poker?" Pete asked. "Would you like to sit in a game?"

"No," Paul said.

Pete suddenly was protective about Charley. He began disliking Paul. Someway he had to take care of Charley. "How come you don't play poker?" he asked, his eyes flashing.

"Charley don't want his kid to gamble," Frieda said. He slipped on his eyeshade, to get a better look.

Paul was silent. He looked angry, confused, and ready to fight. He had grown white. His lips were white as he laughed suddenly, the tips of his teeth showing. But he had begun to enjoy it; there was something strange about the attention. "Is that Charley's kid?" one of the men called from the blackjack table, a card held arrested in his hand. "That a fact?"

But Paul was already noticing a change. "Sure. It's Charley's kid," Frieda said, talking about him as if he were not there, "It's his boy!" But already they were looking strangely at him, the men around the tables and the men standing with him. No, you're not, you aren't Charley King's boy, their eyes said. *No, I am not his son!* Paul wanted to cry out as they surrounded him. But there was no need for him to cry out, for they were thinking it already. They peered at him from under their hats, searched over his face and body, looking silently for something to link him with Charley. Little by little their eyes turned away from him. He felt dizzy. The men went back to their games. No, it wasn't Charley's boy, not in a hundred years.

Pete gave Paul a cigarette. Sleigh was ready with a match, the flame flickering in the draft of the electric fan. "If you go fishing with us," Sleigh said, "then you can help us land those big sonofaguns; but you got to watch out." His eyes went blank, trying to remember what it was you had to watch out for.

Pete looked down at the floor. "I don't know where Charley is," he said. "We don't know where he went to."

"Charley?" Titanic said, coming from the wheel room. "I saw him go out ten minutes ago, with Kersten and the barber, Joe Joseph."

"Titanic here almost beat your old man at golf one day," Pete said, looking for something to say. "Titanic can pitch a card and make it go right through the crack in a door."

"I'll show you someday," Titanic said.

"Kersten, the millionaire?" Paul asked.

"He's a nice fella," Pete answered absently.

There were small stained-glass windows in the hallways and a refined hum in the barroom of the German Club. It was an old club, the oldest in the city, with lawns around the building and polished oak staircases and thick rugs on the floor. Charley had tried to join the club a year ago, when he was growing rich enough to afford it, and had only nodded his head and grinned faintly, without rancor, when Kersten came to tell him they had blackballed him. Charley had expected they would.

But the same men who had solemnly blackballed him in their meeting were glad to see him walk into the bar with Kersten and Joe Joseph; they hung around Charley and said they'd like to drop into his place someday, and maybe they could have a game of golf together sometime. Wouldn't he like a drink? Because they knew who he was, and liked him. They knew all the stories about him. They secretly would have liked to be like him even though, naturally, they could not let a professional gambler appear on their membership list. They said these things solemnly among themselves. A few of the men, when his name was put up, even talked it over with their wives. Some of the wives were surprisingly kind and said it might not matter so much, if it were just a men's club. But what about Family Dinner days and the dances. He would probably bring his girl or his wife and family, if he had one. Yes, the wives said, did they think that would be quite fair? The husbands nodded, a little with concealed regret and an unconscious scorn for their wives and themselves, and walked away.

But they envied Kersten his friendship with Charley, the way they excused his friendship with his barber, since he

was rich enough to do what he wanted in the city. Often Charley played billiards with Kersten at the German Club, always glad that he beat Kersten, because then out of courtesy he was allowed to pay for the drinks in the bar-room. He liked to pay his own way and everyone else's; he felt offended when others paid for him, especially rich men like Kersten, as though he did not have the ready cash himself.

Kersten was gray-haired and plainly dressed, with a quiet smile always on his lips. Joe Joseph looked very much like him, but poorer and milder. The bond between Kersten and Joseph was Richard Strauss and egg dumplings and card-playing. Every Wednesday and Saturday they had dinner together at the club, talking about Strauss, with the chef fixing dumplings especially for J. Walter Kersten and his guest. Afterwards they gambled. On alternate Wednesdays Joe Joseph trimmed Kersten's hair before dinner, free. He would have been hurt if Kersten had wanted to pay, the way Charley would have been hurt if he had not been allowed to buy the drinks at Kersten's club. There were strange rules about money between friends like Kersten and Joseph and Charley.

Kersten was old enough to be Charley's father. There was still good whisky left at the club, despite Prohibition. The three men drank in a small, old paneled room with a slot machine in one corner and a bartender as old and respectable as the club. The bartender did not believe in Prohibition, complaining aloofly but unreasonably because he could not get decent liquor to mix his highballs. He scowled at the whisky he served them.

Though it was good stuff, Charley thought. He was looking steadily down into his shot glass, his forehead wrinkled, the black eyebrows shooting downward toward the bridge of his nose. He looked rapt. He could not make

himself wake up. "Well, is something on your mind?" Kersten was asking quietly. His politeness was gentle. They had driven to the club in Charley's Cadillac but all the way had talked only about the rain, blowing in the wind as it rose again. They had spoken about nothing important, holding their minds blank ever since Charley had come up to Kersten at the roulette table and said could he see him a minute, there was something he wanted to ask him about; and Kersten had said, "How about the club? It's a nice quiet place to talk." Charley was glad to get away from the gambling place, which had grown so big, so strange and empty. "Well, you wanted to ask me about something?" Kersten said, in the bar, when the moment at last had come to break their silence.

"I was wondering about Florida," Charley said. He looked up abruptly. His face looked young and hard, Kersten thought. Then Kersten looked vaguely surprised at another thought that struck him—though he did not know why, he suddenly saw something new and very plain in Charley's face. It became a face that was still eager to live, to meet things rather than turn away from them; but over it was a hollowness. "I thought maybe you could tell me what it's like down there," Charley said. "I thought maybe I'd take a trip down."

But he was not wondering about Florida at all. He was thinking about next Monday when he would be raided, his name in the paper, and when he would no longer have a son. And he thought of how rich he was growing, but how it was going to do no good. He thought of his mother, using his money to buy him a place in heaven and he thought of Lon, alone, and what she would do. All at once Florida was the place to which he could escape.

"Florida?" Kersten was saying. "You'll like it there. That's the place to rest. You look like you could use a

rest," he said, turning to Charley again with the disturbing thought that the face, which looked so young and hard, also had a stubborn exhaustion in it. It came as a shock to Kersten. He looked at Charley trying not to let him know he was looking. It kept shocking him, a puzzling finality in the features, a strange look of something ending. It shone with a dull light on Charley's face. "You'll like it down there. The beaches and hotels and race tracks and fishing," Kersten said, wondering why he talked with a sudden urgency. "You could rest."

Charley nodded. He felt better, thinking about Florida. A good rest might be the solution, the doctor had said; get away from your job and get other things on your mind, stop worrying and stop running a race with life, because life will win, you won't, my friend. Suddenly everything became possible; everything was going to be all right in Florida, Charley thought. He was thinking of the fishing in the ice-blue waters and the rank sunshine and Lon sitting under an umbrella at the hotel, looking the way she always should have looked, rich and important and contented, and somehow making it all right, his years of gambling, just because she looked that way at last, with strangers glancing back to whisper among themselves how pretty she was.

And Paul, to mix with the crowd he liked, and walk like a prince into the expensive dining rooms, pleased perhaps at last that Charley's ready money could buy these things. Then he was thinking that by going to Florida he could escape the raid, his name in the paper—if he left at once, that was. He had enough money now and he could turn the place over to Pete for a couple of months, who would not mind taking the rap on the raid. They could drive off tomorrow if they felt like it, Lon and Paul and himself. He could kill the fear of the big place that was growing on him, almost as though he hated gambling, never wanted

to touch slippery cards or chips again with his fingers. In Florida, his life would come back. He grew certain. What else had he worked for, all his years, except this moment, to take his money, Lon, Paul, to live in a rich hotel waking up mornings to see the wide tossing ocean through the window?

Kersten saw color run back into Charley's face and the dull light vanish. "I think I'll take a run down there," Charley said. "I'll take my wife and boy along."

He was laughing. The sound made Kersten feel much better. He put his hand on Charley's shoulder but looked as though he didn't know he had it there. But though he felt better, Kersten still found himself trembling. He did not know about what, except the shock that had come to him, the unaccountable alarm, the way it had come to Lon too through Charley's voice or to Ada, in the office. He kept a slow wonder in his gentle eyes, trying to recall what the shock was that he had felt; but slowly with Charley's laugh it was fading from him, and all he felt was some faint confusion.

"What do you think of that?" Charley was saying to Joe Joseph. "How does it sound? A nice vacation, just laying around in the sun all day, with a little time out at the race-tracks—" And he could always find a poker game to sit in down there, he was thinking. His face bristled with the rising excitement. He was already thinking he ought to call up Lon, to tell her to pack. He did not like to waste time. He craned toward the bar mirror to make sure his stickpin was safe in his tie.

"Florida?" Joe Joseph asked. His glasses reflected the lights and made him seem eyeless. He smiled remotely. He had calendar pictures of the Grand Canyon and Old Faithful on the walls of his barber shop. That was as far as he could travel. But he could not help smiling, looking away. "That must be some place down there."

Charley grinned, reached for his hat, and put a bill on the bar. Kersten, blushing mildly, knew he was going to tip too much and when he heard what Joseph said he thought he ought to take him along down to Miami some winter. He would mention it to Edith. It would be a treat, he thought, as the three men walked out of the bar together, surprised when they got outside to see that the rain had stopped. The wind was hunting again down the black streets.

Alice came blinking from her small bedroom after her husband John went to answer the doorbell. When she saw Lon sitting in the parlor she scowled. She went to the windows, lifting the lace curtain to look out, holding her fleshless hand against her forehead to see better into the darkness—she must have expected, Lon thought, to see evil strangers come running down the street in pursuit of Lon. She looked fearsome and outraged. John was standing in the middle of the floor in his nightshirt, scratching stuporously at his stomach. He could not wake up. Alice turned around suspiciously, and her thin body seemed to creak with the motion. Her face went aghast. "What time is it?" she demanded. "It must be the middle of the night!" Something crossed her face as she glanced at Lon, and Lon knew that she was really suffering.

There was a leftover smell of lamb and cabbage in the house. The rooms were small and crowded. Lon sat on the leather sofa. But now she felt merely foolish. She had been unable to go home because of what she suddenly knew; there was no other place to come but to Alice's. But already she was wishing she had not come. Alice and John had borrowed money from Charley, when he was not earning much, to buy the leather sofa on which she was sitting, but they still did not like Charley, even though they had never paid back the debt. Lon had wanted to tell Alice what she

knew about Charley now. But looking at Alice, hugging her wool wrapper around her, she knew she would never tell her. Her face was pale and blue-veined from sleep. She had a strong, protective love for her sister Lon. She really believed Charley was something evil. It made Lon ashamed. Alice kept glancing at her suspiciously. If something was wrong, Charley had made it wrong, and vengeance was flaming in her eyes.

"What's the matter?" she asked, coming to sit beside her. Her scrawny hands with streaks of red shining through the tight skin went over Lon's hands. "What's happened now?" She sounded hopeful. She looked up at John. "Go heat the coffepot. We'll drink some coffee." They always sat around the kitchen table drinking coffee whenever anything went wrong. It gave them stability, and somehow left them capable of fighting whatever trouble there was.

But Lon only pretended to laugh. It was what she had been doing all night, running toward nothing. She knew she could never tell them anything. "Nothing's the matter. I was only out for a ride, and I didn't want to go home alone."

"Out for a ride at this time of night?" Alice asked.

"I went downtown to a show."

"Alone?"

Lon nodded. Alice called to John not to put the flame too high. Lon longed to put her head down in Alice's lap. It was terrible to carry such a secret alone. But she could not tell them. Secretly, it would please them.

Alice did not believe her story that she had just been out for a ride. Lon saw something gleaming in her sister's eyes, something struggling. Then she was surprised to see tears there, shining along the red rims. "If something's wrong—" Alice said through her tight lips; but her raging eyes said she knew something was wrong. Charley was in trouble

again, he would disgrace them all yet, he would bring them to a terrible end. Alice struggled with the terrible things that Charley had brought on them. She looked piously toward the big oval picture of their dead mother hanging on the wall and then turned back to Lon. There was almost hope in her voice. "Is Charley in jail?" She said it with a short catch of breath; she had been waiting, in a smoldering triumph, for twenty years to ask it. Suddenly her hate for Charley snapped inside her.

"He's not in jail," Lon tried to laugh. "Charley's good—don't you worry!"

"No siree!" Alice hummed. And with the crooked smile of triumph on her lips, she kept blinking the hot tears away from her eyes. "A man is known by the company he keeps . . ." she said darkly. She did not know herself what she meant; but she was terrified of the doom that was coming on them.

Lon shook her head. Despite Alice's hatred of Charley, she felt a dumb pity for her. But she knew it was useless. She could not say that she was worried that something was wrong with Charley, because Alice would hum that of course something was wrong, why wouldn't there be, the kind of life he led? Lon could not bare Charley before Alice and John. She tried to understand what it was that strove in her, some need to protect him, to keep him aloof and remote from people like these. Even though it meant living alone with what she knew. She leaned forward and kissed Alice on her dry cheek and then started home alone, to wait again through the long night. But all this she gave Charley gladly.

In the crap room you could hear the sweat drop. That's what Sleigh said, his face grave. No one was shooting craps but the two strangers and Bergson, still betting his quarters.

All the other gamblers had quit, standing like stones to watch the luck of the two strange men.

On Rob's face the moisture pushed from his pores on his temples, on his upper lip, in the palms of his hands. Under the fiercely bright lamps the dice rolled over the green felt table, thudded against the boards in the silence. No one was talking. Only Rob droned from time to time, trying to hold down his panic. His eyes were crazy and swung like bees around the room, while he wished to God Charley would come, he wished to God something would happen to get him out of this, his stomach hurt so a ton of sodium bicarbonate wouldn't help.

Frieda watched the dice like an animal stalking prey. Paul was in the crowd, jammed between the men from the poker and blackjack tables who had come over to watch. All the men's faces were shiny with watching. Ada was drunk and watched with an angry, bent smile on her lips. Pete Senta had closed the roulette game. He kept asking if anyone knew where Charley might be. Until Charley came, they could not close up the game. Charley made it a slogan that no game would ever close until his bankroll was gone. But they did not believe it. They could not even change rakers, because this was Rob's game. He was boss in the crap room. But Rob would have given anything to have someone else rake. He began to breathe heavily, gasping through his narrow lips, elbowing the crowd away from behind him because they cut off his air; and the shrill drunken cries of the two strangers kept coming like pistol shots in his ears.

For something strange had happened to the two men. They were drunk with luck. Rob tried to catch their eye but whenever he did they looked back blankly. They forgot they knew him. They had gone wild with their luck. They forgot Rob and their whole scheme. He wasn't even throw-

ing in the crooked dice any more, with which they were going to beat Charley. He used Charley's own dice, honest dice, and still the two men kept winning. He lost his nerve. He wasn't even a good crook.

They were over ten thousand winner. Rob had supposed that when they had won a few thousand, they would cash in, go home, and split with him someplace later. But that was when the strange thing happened to the men. They went crazy, deaf and blind with their luck. They forgot to stop; they could not stop. The run of luck caught them and dragged them along, and the wilder they grew, the more they won. They were betting the limit, a hundred dollars, on every roll of the dice. Bergson had almost every quarter in the house piled up before him. He hugged his thin arms around the piles; he was crazy too, so crazy now that he was terrified of losing even one quarter back. Everyone in the place had quit his game to come and watch—the men looked on, horrified, unmoving, as though they watched some terrible sight. Their envy made them stiff. No one talked. Only the dice rolling, the shrill high laughter of the two men as they won still another bet.

Titanic suddenly thought of something. He moved soundlessly beside Pete Senta. "If Charley's with Kersten, maybe they went to the German Club. That's where Kersten hangs out."

Pete looked swiftly at Titanic and ran for the telephone. But Sleigh also heard him. He had to help Charley. He took one look at the crowded room, the hard-breathing men in the silence, the jam against the table, and rushed from the big place, not even taking his hat or coat, racing down the wet streets and stumbling once, getting an ugly stain on the elbow of his snow-white jacket, rushing to tell Charley what was happening, that a couple of strangers were cleaning him out.

CHAPTER SEVEN

BUT SLEIGH

had run only a block when he saw Charley's Cadillac drive by. The streets were glossy though the rain had stopped, the arclights dropping wet and melting on the pavement, Sleigh turned, racing back to the place. When he got there Charley and J. Walter Kersten and Joe Joseph were already going up the steps.

Titanic let them in and whistled softly. Charley took one look at Titanic's face and asked "What's the matter?" But Titanic's gloom made him laugh; it struck him as funny. *Now it's starting again*, he thought, not knowing what was starting. But the look on Titanic's face let him know something was wrong. He was feeling so good about leaving for Florida in the morning that it did not matter. He was going to call Lon and wake her up in the middle of the night to tell her to begin to pack their things, and thinking how surprised Lon would be was so enjoyable that this, more than anything, made him laugh at Titanic.

"They're taking you," Titanic said, following after him. "Those two strange guys, the ones no one knows how they got in. They've got the cashbox nearly empty."

Charley stopped. He looked at Titanic and then saw Sleigh, out of breath, a muddy smudge on his elbow, running after him. "Is that possible?" Charley said, but he wasn't talking to Sleigh or Titanic. He looked down at his hands, arrested by the slow surprise rising in him over what

Titanic had said: the two strangers, the ones he had been mistrustful about.

Sleigh shook his head. He looked envious and dismayed. He pulled thoughtfully at the lobe of his ear. "They sure taking you, Charley," he said. "They got all your dough."

"You don't say so," Charley said. He could feel the muscles of his face and body pull tighter. "How much are they winner?"

"Nearly twelve thousand," Titanic said.

"You don't say."

A happier thought struck Sleigh, as he followed Charley into his office. "Your boy's here," Sleigh said. "He's a fine boy."

"You don't say so," Charley answered.

But he had not heard Sleigh. He forgot everything. He was bristling, beginning to be alive again. He already had his coat off, and was kneeling to open the safe, knowing what he must do to stop the two strangers from breaking him—he had figured it out in the last few seconds, while he stood there, staring down at his hands. He pushed his hat back on his head. He was suddenly happy, drawing out the bags of silver dollars, heavy as stones and blissfully tugging at his wrists as he lifted them. He took out the piles of paper bills, neatly stacked and tied, over thirty thousand dollars' worth. His fingers ached as he touched the bills, his eyes burned as they fell on the bags of silver.

Pete Senta burst into the office. Charley had never seen him look scared before. A lock of his hair that never before had been out of place, fell to the side of his head. "For Christ's sake, Charley," Pete cried. "They'll bust you! Rob's paying off just like money was dirt!" He reached for a drink. His eyes wandered, he looked like someone talking to himself. "For Christ's sake, they got Rob took for more

than twelve thousand already. I never saw such a run! Rob's turned green!"

"What a world, what a world," Charley said.

"Why, for Christ's sake, what you doing with all that cash?" Pete looked surprised. "They'll take it right away from you, honest, Charley, you never saw such a run! Aren't you going to close the game?"

"I wonder where they come from," Charley said.

"Where from? I don't know, they come from some burg up north. I heard them say so. They've got Rob going crazy."

"Rob never went crazy," Charley said.

"It's screwy," Pete said, "it's not right. They look like a couple of suckers—"

"Some suckers!" Charley laughed, piling up the stacks of bills.

Pete looked down at the money. It squirmed before his eyes. "They win every bet they make. They'll kill you," he said, but his voice suddenly fell. He was defeated. Charley was defeated.

"Are they on the square?"

"I watched like a hawk. I don't see 'em slip any dice in. The shills don't either—I asked them myself." He shook his head, looking at the squirming bills. "They'll kill you."

"Change the dice?"

"Holy Christ, fifty times Rob changed the dice! He's turned green. Honest to God, he's green!" There were tears of rage in his eyes. He sounded mournful, thinking what the strangers were going to do to Charley. He rubbed his hand over his face. It was going to be terrible. Everyone was crazy. He wondered if Charley was crazy too. Pete had nerves like iron; he had never known what fear was before. But when his nerves cracked, thinking how the men were breaking Charley, they cracked all at once. He had

watched the men; but Charley had not seen them yet. It was like a drunken nightmare, watching the two men rake in their winnings and knowing they were never going to stop, they would go on and on until every last cent in the place was piled before them. It was terrible. Pete shook his head.

But Charley had not moved for several minutes. He was slowly piling up his nerve. He was figuring out what he must do. He had never heard of a run like this. There was something uncanny about it. Most other gamblers would close the game, knowing they could not win once the luck turned against them like that. But he never thought for a moment of closing the game. Something drove him. All night long he had wanted to laugh, watching himself grow richer and richer; but now that he was losing, he had to fight to win back. Even if he lost it would be all right, but he had to fight. His body, his wrists and fingers, felt like steel. He was smiling, to himself, to something far away. He forgot Pete, in the room with him. But he could not lose. He remembered Florida. He was thinking that all evening, without knowing it, he had been fighting for everything in his life. He took out extra cartons of new dice from the safe, stacking them beside the bags of money. He raised his head abruptly, shocked by the deadly silence that had come over the gambling place. He had not noticed it before. Only from the crap room there came a faint murmur, a whispering, and the rush of the dice.

Then he kept smiling, but a different smile, thinking with a chill of what he was going to do, but also thinking what would happen to him if the dice kept on running hot. In a flash he saw himself, flat broke; the place gone, his house gone, the cars gone. Where was Lon? Where was Paul? He swung his eyes, looking for the rest of the picture. Something gathered in his stomach, a sickening rush of

blood. Then he chuckled, picked up the bags and stacks of money and nodded to Pete. "O.K.?" he said.

The men stood in a tight band around the crap table. Jesus, they whispered, and restlessly shifted their bodies, looking at each other with mute disbelief. Kersten watched, his kindly gray head tipped sidewise; he looked troubled and perplexed by what was happening. Joe Joseph, beside him, quietly curled his fingers in his pocket around the eighteen dollars he had won on the wheel. He tried to count the money on the crap table but it made his eyes swim, so that he had to take off his glasses, slowly polishing them.

Charley carried the bags of silver and paper money into the crap room. Pete Senta followed him, bringing the new cartons of dice, running his hand repeatedly over his oily hair. He was still pale but he held his features like stone. He had discovered the fallen lock on his forehead and when he brushed it back, it was like all his nerves going back into place. He pulled himself together, following Charley like a young Charley. All his iron will was back in his unblinking eyes.

Charley walked mechanically, coming into the crap room with an air of surprise, letting the low chuckle come again from his lips as he saw the gamblers, with envious absorption, crowded around the crap table. Every other room was deserted. The crap room was hot and foul with their breaths. The white-topped poker and blackjack tables were deserted, the lights from the pendent lamps falling on nothing but emptiness, empty chairs pushed crooked, abandoned cards. His legs twitched. But he shivered with joy. All over the room was a haze of smoke, the odor of men and money, a silence broken only by Rob's exhausted, droning voice from the head of the table.

Then he saw the gleeful faces of the two men who were breaking him, betting wildly and laughing with curt, stifled hiccups as they won bet after bet. They were young, maybe thirty-three or thirty-four, Charley figured, and drunk with all the money they were winning. As he approached the table, elbowing his way through the crowd, his face was as calm as Rob's was frenzied. But a restless joy kept pounding in him. The crowd watched wonderingly.

Rob saw him coming, and all his body slumped with relief. His underlip shot out with a raspy laugh. He tossed down the croupier's rake, upsetting a pile of chips by mistake. But he was relieved; Charley was back, and could shut down the game. His narrow eyes flickered. "All right," Rob said. "That's all, fellas. The game's closed."

"The game isn't closed," Charley said.

But he did not look at Rob or anyone else. He wiped his hands together, once he had set the money down beside the almost empty cashbox. He took out his watch to glance at it, as though nothing at all were at stake. It was exactly five minutes to three.

He looked at Rob. He might have asked only what the weather was like outside. "How much did they take you for?"

"It's over twelve thousand now," Rob whispered. His unclean teeth shone through his whisper. Charley saw he was shaking all over. He never saw anyone look so guilty before. He did not know how Rob had been cheating him, but all at once he knew Rob was guilty and in some way mixed up with what was happening. But then he turned his glance quickly away. Whatever there was to see on Rob's face, he did not want to see it. A wave of sick revulsion swept over his mouth. He said nothing. He picked up the dice Rob had dropped on the table, and felt them

hot, sweaty, sticky, in his hand. But they were his own dice; the perfect dice.

He scowled and then snorted. Then he stepped up on the six-inch-high raker's stand where Rob had stood. The two men, who had come in with only a few hundred dollars but now were over twelve thousand winner, looked at him cravenly. In their drunkenness they were afraid he might shut up the game. Then he rolled out the dice to them, and the game began again.

No one else gambled or wanted to gamble—everyone pushed around the crap table to watch the phenomenal run of luck of the two men. They kept betting the limit, one hundred dollars, on each throw of the dice. They scratched the air with their ecstatic choking laughter, and had the whole table to themselves save for little Bergson, down at the end, his cap jerked forward over his age-old face as he bet quarter after quarter.

Charley laughed, watching Bergson's quarter plop down on the line alongside the hundred-dollar bets. He glanced at Pete's face beside him, no muscle twitching, glanced around and saw Frieda shaking his chunky head with its rabbinical stubble of hair, his face creased and solemn. Then Frieda turned and shuffled out of the room. He could not endure to watch any longer.

"The limit's off, gentlemen," Charley suddenly said.

Frieda left the crap room, rubbing his thick fingers over his forehead as though he were only sleepy, and went to sit down at one of the empty tables. He picked up a stack of chips from a chip box and let them drop through his fingers with a slow click-click-clicking sound. Sleigh came out of the deserted wheel room where he had gone to look for cigarette coupons. He found three, folding them neatly and putting them in his jacket pocket. He had gone upstairs

for a new jacket, in spite of all the excitement about the strangers, and now his elbows were white and pure again.

When he saw Frieda he remembered his hamburgers. It was past three o'clock and he had not thought of them until now. He slipped out quietly, letting the metal door lock with a soft sigh behind him.

Frieda looked old and tired. It wasn't right; nothing was right; nothing made sense. He wondered where he would go, or where Sleigh and all the others would go if Charley went broke tonight. It wasn't that they couldn't find work in other gambling places, but it wouldn't be Charley's place. They would have to move, leave the upstairs rooms. He would have to go outside. His small beads of eyes went blank with thinking of having to walk through that door, going outside.

He was drumming his fingers. His fingers were like stumps, the tips seemed cut off, and he drummed them patiently. He saw his diamond ring on his little finger and heavily, unwillingly, there crawled into his mind a thought. If Charley went broke, he could sell the ring and loan him the money. He turned the idea over. It was not an idea that made him glad. Thinking about it gave him a sodden, depressed feeling. The ring glittered cleaner than ice.

He couldn't make up his mind. He breathed heavily, thumping his fingers, half consciously listening to the drone of Charley's voice from the crap room. The idea churned slowly inside his head. He had almost no eyebrows, but the heavy folds of flesh drooped over his holes of eyes, as he tried to make up his mind. If he didn't give it to Charley, he might have to go through that door; but that was not why he would give it to him. He looked heavily toward the door, saw it open, and saw Sleigh come inside.

Sleigh had a brown paper bag with ten hamburgers inside it, instead of the half dozen he usually bought. They

were filled with sliced onions and pickle. He felt there was something special tonight, something that would make Frieda need extra things to eat, with the bad things that were happening in the back room. He took the hamburgers out of the bag, flattened the bag neatly like a plate and put the hamburgers on it. Then he pushed the bag over to Frieda and sat down across from him, ready to watch him eat. Frieda picked up a hamburger and began to chew with slow thoughtful bites, staring away in distance, and Sleigh was pleased. He saw a limp shred of onion drop to the floor and told himself to remember to pick it up after Frieda had finished eating. Frieda did not talk. He struggled with his thought.

Rob had ducked out of the crap room. He went into the washroom and took a large dose of sodium bicarbonate, leaning sickly against the washbowl waiting for it to make him feel better. Something had happened to him. He looked at his face, yellow and drawn in the mirror, and gave off his spurt of ugly laughter. He was shaky because of the way the thing with his friends in the crap game had gone—it had grown too big for him. It was the way he stole from Charley, in dribbles. He had figured that maybe they would clean him out of a few thousand dollars and quit. But the way it went, the thousand after thousand, left him boneless. Then he suddenly remembered. He took the pair of crooked dice from his pocket and dropped them into the toilet, flushing the toilet twice to make sure they were gone.

It did not help. He kept seeing the way Charley had looked at him. The quiet look plagued him. He was not feeling ashamed. He did not know how. He was just worried. He was not sharp enough ever to think that all these years Charley had known how he was stealing from him.

But Charley's look and his fear made him think that perhaps he knew now.

He spat out his gratey laugh. Then abruptly he ducked. He did not know from what, but he shot his head sidewise, his eyes swinging as if a strong arm had come flying in his direction. It was what he was so afraid of. That Charley, having found out, might beat him up. He blew his nose; then stood stone-still, waiting for the soda to work but nothing happened. There wasn't any relief anywhere. He had no friends and he was always alone, but for the first time he was afraid of being alone. He did not care if Charley went broke, so long as he didn't beat him up.

"Keep your paws off me, you bastard!" he said out loud.

He did not say it to anyone. He often talked to himself. His legs felt like straw and he said it just to hear some sound in the room where he had locked himself alone.

"We'll give you a little chance to lay something by, gentlemen. The limit's off," Charley said again.

He saw Pete beside him purse his lips and raise his eyebrows, trying to keep his nerve. He was grateful to have Pete next to him. The crowd rustled when Charley said the limit was off. The arc of light from the hanging lamps cut the men in half. Their heads and shoulders were lost in the darkness, and only their hands, motionless, thumbs in vest pockets, shone in the rays of yellow light. Charley watched to see whether the two men were slipping dice in. He knew his own dice were honest, and with them all he needed was time and the nerve to outlast the strangers.

One of the men, senseless with his luck and elated with the sky-high limit, bet five hundred dollars right off, chuckling to himself, playing with his whole body, shaking his head, snapping his fingers, puckering his mouth as he whispered his love to the dice. He threw a six for his num-

ber. On the next roll he threw a six again. It was as easy and insane as that. He threw up his hands. It was like the first hours of love, it was all velvet; he could not imagine his luck ever changing.

Charley tossed over the five hundred dollars, and a quarter down to Bergson. "Is that possible?" he smiled. He began his monotonous drone. "Why, you wouldn't believe it, the boys here are married to luck. Here's five hundred bucks, sir, and thank you . . . Yessir, you wouldn't believe it possible!" He made it sound that he paid off gladly. His throat grew dry.

His eyes were glazed with watching the dice so intently, but he never dropped his aloof smile. The room was deathly still. "Why, the gentleman's number is eight, that's a nice number, and he bets me another five hundred . . . that's tall money, gentlemen, if you're asking me! Why, you wouldn't believe it, boys, you wouldn't think it was possible—the gentleman wins again!" He kept up the casual drone. But the sweat was singing in his temples. He paid off the bets that he lost with quiet good nature, each time rolling a quarter down to Bergson.

When the men had won close to twenty thousand, they began to bet a thousand dollars on each roll of the dice. Pete did not move when the men threw the thousand dollars out on the table for the first time; but J. Walter Kersten did, his brow contracting, puzzled by this kind of money and gambling, though he had a million dollars himself. He shook his head. Joe Joseph, who had forgotten to put his glasses back on, looked spellbound at the sights he was seeing. He held his glasses in the vise of one fist, his other hand working as though he held shears in them, absently snipping away. A few of the men cleared their throats—the sound was harsh in the stillness. Ada stood near Kersten. Her bare arms looked thin. She held them

straight downward, crossed at the wrists, and she did not look at the dice or the men but at Charley. She looked transfixed by a terrible sight.

But Charley laughed curtly when he saw the first thousand-dollar bet come up. Then he shook himself with relief, knowing it was what he was waiting for. He spoke more rapidly, fending for time. He wanted to feed the hot, exultant, hypnotized hopes of the men. He knew that soon they would lose their heads; they would go crazy and blind and weep, a terrible sight to see. And he knew that if only he had enough time, and could drive the men, and his nerve and the bankroll lasted, the dice must cool. The bigger the bets came, the more chance he had. "*Well, gentlemen, what will it be? The sky's the limit!*" he called. As he cast the dice across the green felt, he swung a look of relief toward Pete; and as he turned his head, saw Paul.

As the dice were flung out and tossed and flung again, Paul had looked at his father. And what he had been seeing and learning, made him watch in pained wonder. He lifted his soiled blue scarf and held it absently against his mouth. Paul had never seen his father before. The reason why he had come to the place was slipping away—he could not even recall what it was. But he felt something strange in the gambling house. It still puzzled him, that the men had thought he was wonderful because he was Charley's son. Then for no reason they had begun to think he was not wonderful. One by one they had drifted away; he had been left alone to wander among the cardplayers and smoke and crowded tables.

He had roamed through the rooms alone, wondering who this rouged, played-out, drunken woman was or the old woman with diamonds like clusters of grapes at her ears. Frieda he remembered, from the card game in the

north woods and the time Charley had brought him home to supper. He had looked around him, his eyes lidded against the hard yellow lights. Strangely, he had been flattered by the attention the men had given him. Alone again, he made up for it with scorn. He listened to the subdued, hungry voices from the tables. "*Three janes, why is that all you've got? I've got a full! Hit me!—Hit me—come on, please please!—*"

This was his father. Words, sounds, cries of laughter he had never heard before. He went through the rooms, looking for more things that were his father, trying to keep up his arrogant scorn but only feeling sheepish instead. He felt out of place and did not know why he minded it, not fitting in. A look in Pete Senta's eyes kept following him. He moved too tall and too ignored through the rooms until he went into the crap room, and heard the hush of the men, the click of the dice, the moans of "*Three's the number, oh baby come again, three three three she is!*" and the hypnotized, sputtering laughter of the two men. When Charley came in, Paul felt a pain like bright light smash through his arms and legs. But it subsided, even against his will. But he still could not understand. There was respect instead of scorn on the faces of the crowd as they watched Charley come up to the crap table. It was a different father than he had ever seen. This was how his long nights were filled, the nights for which Paul had blamed him, the nights which had made his mother a widow. And all these men were his friends.

Even the important ones, like J. Walter Kersten. He was standing next to Paul. Kersten had a friend whom they said was his barber, and with both of them his father had been drinking at the German Club. It did not make sense, his father's friendship with a millionaire and the millionaire's barber. In his own life friendships did not come this way.

There was only Esther and himself. There were the wanted ones and the unwanted ones. It made him ache to get out of the gambling place, and by pushing his way he had got as far as the door when a hand touched his arm.

It was Kersten. He nodded his kindly white face toward Paul. He was smiling vaguely. "So you're the son of Charley King."

Nothing moved in Paul except that he nodded his head.

Kersten looked down at his locked fingers, then looked up, studying Paul's face. "You look like him." He kept smiling. "But you don't look healthy. Why can't you hold your hands still?"

Paul dug his hands into his pockets.

Remembering his own fatherhood, Kersten put his hand on Paul's shoulder. "You're a tall boy," he said, measuring him. "You should eat a lot." Then he seemed reminiscent. "Your father's a great cardplayer. You don't see them often." He still gazed away, a look of faint shock coming into his eyes. "How old are you?"

"Eighteen," Paul said.

Kersten nodded thoughtfully, that was old enough, his nod said. The boy's not just a boy any longer. He pressed his pale lips together in a moment's indecision and again touched Paul's wrist. "Come over here."

He took Paul into the empty wheel room. The chairs stood askew in the room. But he did not look at Paul. He kept nodding to himself, his nod saying He's old enough, I can tell him this. "I don't think your father's very well. Did you know that?" he asked.

Paul said nothing. Kersten glanced up for an answer, then looked away again. He frowned. "You didn't know. But you're old enough." He sighed gently, and looked as though he had wanted to add, My son. "Sometimes you can just tell those things about people you like. He doesn't look

glanced toward the stacks of crumpled bills before the two drunken strangers. "That's a lot of money."

At the crap table, his father was changing the dice; he held the dice for a split second thoughtfully in his hand. There was no sound. For a brief moment Paul thought he had never seen this man before—he saw the dark, hunted eyes, the taut fingers, the pounding blood. Also he saw the wings of exhaustion under his father's eyes. He wondered why he let himself be driven so; but, dimly, he was beginning to know. In a puzzling sense, though he perspired, though his lips looked dry and cracked, his father looked happy. In a swift flash, he remembered a hundred things about his father, seeing him always alone, always plagued, always driven.

Then he saw something else. He saw that his father was fighting for his life, not only that of blood and flesh but for all the years of his life. And to all these men, pushing around the table, the rich and poor and the shriveled man with his stacks of silver quarters and to sleek-haired Pete Senta, only one thing seemed to matter: whether this man, his father, who had always been a stranger to him, lost or won.

It was just then that Charley glanced up and for the first time saw Paul. Paul wanted to smile. Never before had their eyes met without flinching. But no muscle would move in Paul's face, for as he looked at his father another sound was pouring into his ears—the words he had said at Maggioni's, *He is not my father*. His face grew white, remembering it, and he did not shift his gaze. He held it steadily on this man, standing up on the croupier's stand, his hand arrested as it cast the dice over the green felt table, and would not move his eyes until he felt his own blood wash away the foul words he had said. Then he felt suddenly older, better, even joyous. This is my father, he was thinking, he is my father.

In the flash when Charley saw Paul, he forgot the thousand-dollar bets, the strangers, his bankroll. He had not heard Titanic tell him that Paul was there. He felt Pete's icy fingers twitch against his as he kept handing him new sets of dice. Paul was standing next to Kersten. He's Kersten's son, that's who, Charley was thinking. Pete, standing beside him, was his son. Paul looked like Kersten's boy, with the same bland face, the same smart look in their eyes. They went to colleges and liked to learn. But what if he had made himself that way, become respectable and rich like Kersten instead of a gambler and rich? or if he had made himself like Joe Joseph, a barber, poor but respectable instead of a gambler who might go broke? He grinned to himself. He had cheated himself. He felt the sinking pain of a man ashamed of himself before his son, he felt caught naked, tossing a pair of dice from his hands and letting the coaxing words flow from his lips.

He heard Alice again. The words began to ring true in his ears, seeing how right Paul looked beside Kersten, words so wise and correct that his blood raged because he had never listened before. He's Kersten's kid, that's who, not mine. And he did not know, when he glanced at Paul's white face, that the motionless gaze which he returned was not one of hate; but of something waking in him, coming on this very night when Charley was losing everything—the understanding in Paul's brain and heart that there was something wonderful and great in his father, that here in this world of rolling dice and smoke and stifled oaths he had seen him at last.

Titanic slipped into the office and called his wife Ellen. He always called three or four times during every night. "Hello, Ellen, honey," he said. "Are you feeling all right?"

"I'm fine." She laughed her delighted, cracked laugh. "Are you making lots of money?"

He glanced mournfully back toward the crap room. "Oh, sure, honey." She was miserable when they weren't. "We're carrying it away in bushel baskets."

"That's nice," Ellen said, "because money is nicer than just anything in the world. I could eat it," she laughed.

Ellen sure was crazy, Titanic thought.

What Charley did not know was that he fought for his life and blood and soul. With a shock in his fingertips as they touched the dice, he felt a wild impulse to lose and throw everything away. But in another second, his body gone rigid as iron, he knew that everything he was had to sweat out the winning toss for him.

"For Christ's sake, Charley, are you sleeping?"

It was Pete at his ear, his tight nerves forcing the words out through his teeth. For a moment Charley turned to face him with a sheepish grin. So this was his son, Charley was thinking, Pete with his slick hair and set chin, trying to keep himself tough, but his eyes trying to tell him something. He looked worried again and like a scared kid. Charley kept grinning. For a second he heard nothing, not even Pete's whisper—the whole place was gone, the abandoned tables and laughing drunk strangers and the paralyzed crowd. There was nothing there at all, in the unconscious fraction of a second while the wills to win or lose kept slugging each other inside of him.

"Ain't you going to pay off?" Pete whispered without moving his lips. "These guys just won another thousand bucks. For Christ's sake, Charley, you got to toss them the dough!"

Slowly Charley understood what he was telling him. He turned away and mechanically, silently, counted out ten

one-hundred dollar bills, tossing them to the strangers. But the touch of the money made the life pour back into him. He took a new set of dice from Pete's hand. The dice felt cool, their ivory lovely against his flesh. A powerful haste parted his lips and the coaxing, urgent drone began again. "There you are, gentlemen—are you betting another thousand? . . . here's the dice, sir, nice new clean dice . . . give the gentleman room there, please! Yessir, toss them out, toss them out, come on, baby, baby. . . ."

The crowd gave an airless gasp as the strangers won another bet. "Why, those sonsabitches," Pete whispered fiercely at Charley's elbow but without raising his dead stare from the dice. Ada left the room; she couldn't stand it, what was happening to Charley. She couldn't stand the way Charley kept being aloof and smiling as though nothing were happening at all. She went into the office to get herself a stiff shot. No one noticed as she moved away. Kersten dropped his hand on Paul's arm. "It's amazing," Kersten said, trying to comfort him, "I've never seen such a thing." But Paul was silent.

Charley kept paying off the two men, a thousand dollars at a crack, feeling everything he had made, his whole life, slipping through his fingers to feed the hunger of the two exultant, choking men. They shouted to the dice. They made throttled sounds as they rolled them and stood paralyzed for the hundredth-of-a-second before the dice fell dead. Charley would win a few bets; lose twice as much back in the next few throws. He knew what was happening, he felt it like a stone flung in his face or a pistol fired in his ears—everything he had been in all his years was being taken from him.

His ears suddenly burst with what they heard. It was what one of the strangers said. He had been waiting all along to hear it. He flashed alert. Then the crowd stirred

like a patch of trees whipped into life by sudden wind. In a second they were silent again, the wind died down; they stood like waiting corpses. For one of the strangers, gone blind to the value of money, flung out a sheaf of bills to the board.

"I'll bet two thousand," he said.

"Two thousand?" Charley said, "why, that's a lot of money on a single bet. . . . I'm not mistaken, the gentleman bets me two thousand?"

"Two thousand," the man said, his eyeballs rolling along with the dice because of the fever with which he played.

And won.

His fingers rumbled the money Charley tossed out. "Four thousand," he laughed, heaping it into a pile for the bet.

And won again.

As he raked in his winnings, four thousand dollars on a single roll, he burst into tears. But Charley never ceased his soft urging banter. "Well, gentlemen, four thousand dollars, here you are, count it . . . there it is, sir, you're welcome! . . ."

He did not stop even when Rob burst back into the room, begging him to shut down the game. But his face went red with rage then, as he turned to glance at Rob, so that Rob took a quick lurching step backward, expecting to be hit. He still kept begging Charley to shut down the game.

He swung his sick eyes to Pete. "Can't you make him stop?" he begged. His underlip had a bright dot of blood on it.

The mute men around the table looked from Rob to Pete to Charley. They moved their eyes jerkily. The four-thousand dollar bet had stunned them. It was a dream. They watched remotely like ghosts. They saw Rob take a step nearer Charley and heard his voice still begging; and in

answer saw Charley reach out his hand toward Pete, though not shifting his gaze from the board, asking with his fingers for a new set of dice. Rob might not have been there at all.

They heard him take up his drone again. "Yessir, four thousand dollars to the gentlemen . . . well, sir, you wouldn't believe it, would you?" he laughed wholeheartedly, "they're cleaning me out, clean as a whistle, never in my life did I see anything like it! . . . I wouldn't believe it if my own eyes didn't see it," he smiled, "that's the truth—*why, would either of you boys care to make the bet eight thousand?*"

"Take it easy," Pete whispered.

"Eight thousand, will you take it, sir?" Charley repeated. His voice was steady and laughing. "Plenty of money, plenty of money, there's plenty more where this came from—" he droned, knowing there was little more. His muscles were stiff in pain. He had been holding himself in like iron so as not to lose his nerve, praying in desperation for a change of luck, while he kept up the banter to feed the drunken hopes of the two young men and make them drunker and wilder, lest they quit the game and walk out with all his bankroll.

"For the love of God, take it easy," Pete whispered.

"I'll bet the eight thousand," the stranger said.

Around the table there was no more than the tidelike breathing of the men.

"For Jesus' sake, can't no one stop him?" Rob broke out, and looked in terror around the table.

The stranger was piling up the money for his bet. His hands shook. His glance caught Rob's but he looked blindly at him; he had never seen Rob before in his life. He laughed curtly. He was so hypnotized with winning that his eyes were glassy with greed. "Eight thousand," he hiccuped again, certain already that he would win the bet. And then in a sudden crash of fear burst out, "Eight thousand?" ask-

ing it like a crazy, senseless question. Appalled at what he was doing, he tossed in the money like something tainted that he shook from his hands.

"Why, we'll meet that bet," Charley said. "Yessir, the gentleman bets eight thousand and Mr. Bergson down at the end bets two bits, how do you like that, gentlemen? Eight thousand dollars and twenty-five cents! There you are, sir, roll the dice—four's the number! Yessir, roll them—he *rolls a nine*, why, that's tough luck my friend but try again, try again. . . . Why, would you believe it—a *seven and he's out!*"

"Won't you quit now?" Rob begged. "You won eight thousand back!" He looked at everyone. "Can't no one make him quit?"

Pete was silent, standing at Charley's side. The men watched with aching smiles on their mouths. It was torture, watching so much money change hands. No one answered Rob.

"I'll bet another eight thousand," the stranger said, gone white, but drunk with hope as Charley had prayed he would be. All the value of money was gone. They kept up their expectant, hiccuping laughter, pretending the eight thousand dollars they had just lost was nothing. And their fever was a terrible sight to see.

"Is that the truth now?" Charley droned. "The gentleman places another bet of eight thousand dollars—why, that's the way we like our bets, the bigger the better! There you are, sir, throw them out—and a *four again!* Hold your hats, gentlemen, will she, won't she?—a seven again, and the gentleman *kisses his bet good-by!*"

The two men, with their switch of luck, began to lose nearly every bet. After the two eight-thousand dollar bets they dropped to a five-thousand dollar bet, then to a thousand, and grew afraid. Then each of them won a thousand-

dollar bet. But they were losing their nerve. Charley clung to his like iron. They no longer doubled their bets but tried to sober up, and looked like tired men awakening with hangovers and only reeled more recklessly in their blundering hopes. Charley kept up his urging chatter. He would not let them go. They followed him blindly, blustering angrily as they tride to recoup the money they had begun to lose. Charley pushed his hat back on his head. And because they were once such great winners, he fed them with coaxing words and knew they would try, desperately and foolishly, to be great winners again.

The men around the table began to shift their feet. But they breathed more easily. Something was over; they looked anxious to be gone. Occasionally now they laughed. Rob let his underlip jut out in a burst of leechlike laughter each time Charley won another bet from the strangers. When it was certain that the run of luck was broken he blew his nose, went silently for his hat and coat with a hunted, bent look to his body and left the big place without speaking to anyone. He said he was hungry but he did not say it to anyone; he just said it out loud, to the walls. Sleigh came into the crap room and under the thinning pairs of feet found another coupon.

Pete Senta looked down at the cashbox, almost empty at one time, but full now. All at once he realized what he had been through.

"I'll be God-damned," he whispered.

In the office, Ada sat on Charley's desk, leaning forward to unroll her stocking again, rerolling it tightly just below her knee. Her fingers did not feel like her own fingers, from having too much to drink. Then she poured herself half a glass of the prewar whisky and sipped it, looking meditatively around the empty office. She wondered what

was wrong with Charley. It was the way he looked; she saw it on his face. She ruffled her short hair with her hand, thinking how first Charley had bawled like a kid and she had had her arms around him, and then how he had looked a few minutes ago, aloof, smiling, as though nothing mattered. But something did matter. She knew it because one second his eyes were dead and the next they were flashing as he fought the two strangers like a maniac fighting for his life.

Kersten had told her Charley was going down to Florida. She wondered what it was like down there, with the hot sunny beaches and the blue sky stretching over you at night. She began thinking what it would be like if she could go along with him. She wondered what it would feel like to open her eyes again and see his black hat lying on a chair beside her bed. She felt dizzy from drinking so much. Her thoughts came brokenly. It had been no good, to have her arms around him again a couple of hours ago. Now they hurt. Then she remembered what was happening in the crap room. He was going broke. She had left while the two men were still winning bet after bet, unable to stand the reckless look on his face.

She began to think What if he went broke, and what if she could have the chance to be broke with him? She smiled, almost happily, thinking how she'd stick. She wondered what they would have to go through together. It would be as good as the chance to go to Florida with him and live in the big hotels and lie on the beaches. She poured another drink. She had to wash something down her throat. The only trouble was, this wife of his, Lon. Lon balled it up. But she felt a quick pull of hope, thinking perhaps this Lon wasn't the kind who would be satisfied to stick with Charley if he was broke, perhaps she would leave him. God, thoughts like that could be sonofabitches, lurching bright

and sunny into your mind. She was thinking how fast she would slip in at Charley's side, if this wife of his ever left him, when she looked up and saw a stranger in the doorway of the office.

He was poorly dressed but smiled politely. "Mr. King?" he asked. It was the man who had tried to get in all day. Rob had let him in. Sleigh was in the crap room and as Rob went out, sweating his guilt, the man was waiting outside; he simply walked right in. Rob did not even notice that someone had passed him.

Ada looked blankly at the man, uncrossed her legs and nodded her head toward the crap room. "He's in there." She watched him steadily. He began to leave. "But you'd better not bother him. Stay out of there."

"Then I'll wait," he said.

"Not in here," Ada said.

He left the office, and Ada recrossed her legs, trying to remember what she had been thinking about. Suddenly she remembered, and poured another drink. She was with her thoughts when Sarah came in and broke them off again. There was no peace ever for Ada. Sarah, with her Filipino chauffeur following her like a bodyguard, gave out her high rasp of laughter.

"Has Charley gone broke yet?" she asked.

She said it like something that struck her funny, but it was not the way she felt. As soon as she had heard he was going broke she had the Filipino drive her home, and came back with her jet bag crammed with bills in case Charley needed them. Her gold lower plate gleamed when she laughed. What had struck her funny was the way you always wanted to do things for Charley, without even thinking about it first, even without his asking you. Ada laughed too, as in different ways each of them thought the same thing.

Charley smiled. He stood at the crap table, tossed out the dice, but he was beginning to feel tired. His voice was less coaxing and taut. The two men who had started to break the bank fought desperately to regain their lost luck. They cursed and one of them distorted his mouth to a pout, pounding his hand flat on the table each time he faded. They felt bleary watching their money melt away.

But Charley was no longer interested. He wiped his shirt sleeve over his forehead, and knew their luck was gone. Within half an hour he had won back everything they had once been winner, along with the few hundred dollars they had brought in with them. Then he tossed each of them a twenty-dollar bill for carfare home and closed the game. And again, he felt cheated. He was glad he did not see Rob around. He looked for Paul. Paul was gone. He asked Frieda what had become of him and Frieda said he had left. He had dropped his scarf in the crowd but Sleigh had found it, with a soiled mark on it, and was going to clean it with gasoline and then give it to Charley to take home with him.

Charley nodded. His face ached with tiredness. He smiled hollowly. Kersten came up to him. "That's a nice boy you've got," Kersten said. Charley nodded again but did not look at Kersten. He did not know how it was with Paul, that things were going to be better. All the elation of saving his bankroll was gone. He felt as if he had lost instead. For the last fifteen minutes in the crap room he had felt only tired, nothing more. Only once did he break into real laughter, when little Bergson snatched up the dice and flung them across the room because he had lost all his quarters.

Part Three: FISHING WEATHER

CHAPTER ONE

SLEIGH SAID,

"It's a good thing you didn't lose all your money, Charley, otherwise how we going to take that fishing trip up north, you and Frieda and me?" He looked grave, his mouth half open. "The boat sure was rocking," Charley said, "but it's all right now, Sleigh. You can't hold a good man down. They tried to take me but they couldn't make it." Charley smiled at Sleigh. "No one's ever going to take you," Sleigh said.

"I hope not," Charley answered. He was on his way from the crap room to his office. Pete followed behind him with the bags of silver and paper money and the cashbox. The game was closed. In the crap room, moving slumberously in his carpet slippers, Frieda was stacking up the chips and putting the dice back in their cartons, switching out the green pendent lights and throwing the black oilcloth on the table for Sleigh to spread out later. Pete held the office door open for Charley. Ada rubbed one thin arm and laughed gloomily when she heard Charley had saved his bankroll, though she could not remember why it should make her gloomy, but Sarah greeted him with her high crystal laugh. They did not ask him to talk. They were only waiting there to keep him company, in case he wanted or needed any.

It was only after he had closed up the back room and watched Pete return the money to the safe, that the sleepi-

ness overwhelmed him. He went to stand before the boarded windows. He could not see, but he could hear the wind blowing again down the alleyway. He wondered whether it was light outside. His body felt numb and tired. But only then did he realize how foolhardy he had been, risking all his bankroll to stop the stranger's run of luck; and now that he had his bankroll back again, he wondered why he had fought so wildly to save it, until he remembered Florida.

Kersten told him that down in the Florida waters the sailfish were so big and fought like such devils, they had to strap you in a chair on the fishing boat. It made him smile to himself, as he scratched his head. There would be the warm beaches for Lon to sit on and the things Paul would like: the young rich girls walking in the big hotels. No one would ever know he was a gambler. With all his money to spend, they would think he was someone like Kersten; they would think he belonged to clubs like the German Club. Best of all would be the sunshine and peace and rest, in which the words of the doctor that afternoon would slip slowly away until they had never been said at all.

Already he was more awake. He shook his head to clear the webs away. The thought of Florida made him think he had all of his life back again, held solid in his hands. Until he glanced down to something else he held in his hands, remembering the paper that had been put there by a man waiting outside his office door as he came from the crap room. He squinted. And as he read it, slowly, forming the words with his lips, he grew aware that something in the long night was ending, the way he had known years ago on a night when he walked the dark streets that something in his life had begun.

He tossed the paper on his desk, sat down and clapped his hands together. "You wouldn't believe it was possible," he said.

"In this country anything's possible," Sarah said, the pleasure of reminiscence leaping on her face. "Look at Opal Griggs, the mulatto. She was so high class, but she ended up running away with a milk wagon driver. But she was a good, lovely girl."

"It's not possible," Charley said, rubbing his hand over his chin.

"Opal was always good to the boys."

"Be quiet, Mother," Ada said. She looked at Charley. "What's that paper?"

"You wouldn't believe it," he said, snapping the fingers of one hand against the palm of the other. He sat with his legs spread apart, his elbows on his knees. He turned up to her, and looked about to speak. But then he only laughed, as at some secret bitter joke with himself.

Pete Senta was pouring himself a shot of whisky. He had not been looking or listening. Now that the crap game was closed, he was jittery. His face still looked hard and solid, his cheeks flat, not one sleek hair on his head was out of place. But beneath the flesh his muscles hummed and sang in a frenzy. He tipped off the shot quickly, before the shaking inside him could crawl out through his fingers and give him away. But then he saw the paper on the desk. He turned grinning to Charley. "It's a summons," he said, as though Charley did not know.

Charley grinned back. Frieda was coming through the doorway with the boxes of dice and the croupier's rake to put them away. Then they all began to laugh. Once or twice a month a summons came; it was becoming a racket. It was always a joke. Someone lost a few dollars and sued Charley for twice that much, saying the place was crooked.

Then Charley spun into a round of fixing with lawyers and plaintiffs before the case went to court, usually paying off about half the amount they sued for, even though they might not have lost that much. But he could not fight it in court, where a gambler never was believed. It was a blind alley from which he had to pay his way quickly. The publicity would have meant closing the place. He called himself a sucker every time he paid off, always with a short laugh, and that was where the joke came in, and where Pete and Titanic and Frieda would begin the ribbing, secretly and with irony really not ribbing him but the rotten world they lived in, where laws could make a sucker out of a man like Charley. They were ashamed and infuriated and laughed to hide it. They knew how their backs were against a wall, their pants were down, they were caught by their short hair, those were all the things they said to themselves and felt in their hearts but did not say out loud. When they laughed it was all together at this kind of world, the sound coming from their mouths helpless and bitter like prisoners looking through bars at the good free world other people had made for themselves.

Sleigh came into the little office. He had just had crazy luck. One of the customers had left the place forgetting a brown paper bag he had brought in with him, and in the bag were a dozen and a half green, tender pears. He passed them around, first to Frieda, but only Frieda ate the pears. He took two, one in each hand, his ferret's eyes looking down thoughtfully as he ate, his lips wet with the juice.

Then Sleigh saw the paper and began laughing too. He was pleased that he could be in on this joke with his friends. "One of them summons," he said, feeling glad, but with the same cruel feeling inside him that made them all laugh, because in some way they were all caught together, all hurling to their destruction. "They come regular like clock-work."

"I think I'd better close up the place," Charley said.

But no one heard him. Nor did they notice he had stopped laughing. Titanic came in and saw the summons and got a grin on his mournful face, but like all of them, with the terror locked behind his eyes. "Another one," Titanic grinned. "Oh Jesus, they sure take you for rides. They've got your number, Charley."

It was a good joke all right. Pete felt better and his queasiness stopped. He flicked his hand over his hair. Ribbing Charley made him feel like a big shot. "You can shell out, boy," Pete said. "Shell out and like it. They sure got you down for a sucker."

"Charley," Sleigh said, glad to be in with them, "he's certainly some sucker."

"I'm a sucker," Charley said, and slapped his palm again with his fingers.

But Ada was still. She was looking at him. "How much?"

"They used to send me those papers," Sarah said. "I always gave them to the judge when he dropped in."

"I can't give this one away," Charley said.

"How much?" Ada asked again. The drinking had made her face look old. There was too much rouge on her sallow flesh.

"Fifty thousand," Charley said.

"Charley's the biggest sucker I ever saw," Sleigh said, not listening.

Pete swung around. He looked paralyzed. "No kidding."

"We'd better close up," Charley said.

Pete did not believe his ears. He hunted for something to say. He looked worried and outraged. Charley was watching him. Pete snorted. "Close up?" he asked. They never closed until six or seven. "It ain't even five o'clock!" But his black eyebrows wrenched themselves upward.

"Fifty thousand," Charley repeated, looking into their questioning faces. There was a stillness in the room and

through it rang their love for Charley. Frieda put down his pears and moved heavily to look at the summons. Slowly they began to believe him. Sleigh kept grinning, not certain what had happened. The flash of Frieda's diamond caught his eye and he watched it catlike. Pete suddenly poured a drink and offered it to Charley but he shook his head. Pete set it untouched on the desk and Titanic silently picked it up, nothing moving on his long face as he drank it in one gulp. Sarah was smiling like a bad child. Something was spreading over all of them. It was the trap. They did not know why, but this time they were caught. They knew it from the look on Charley's face.

Pete pursed his lips, picked up the cork of the whisky bottle and ground it beneath his heel. "Fifty thousand? Why, there ain't that much money! Who's bringing suit? The mint?"

"Rosnik," Charley said. And after a moment added, "Well, not exactly—"

Titanic took the summons from Frieda's hands. "Mrs. Rosnik," he read. "Mrs. Max Rosnik plaintiff vs. Charles King, defendant." The paper rattled. "The sum of fifty thousand dollars extorted from the plaintiff's husband Max Rosnik by illicit means—" He looked up. "What's illicit mean?"

"That Rosnik bastard," Ada said, but looking away, not at Charley or Titanic with the summons or at anyone.

"That bastard," Charley chuckled.

Slowly in Frieda's small eyes a hate was growing. But he kept silent.

"That Rosnik," Sleigh said, looking puzzled, "he's been coming in here regular."

"He lost maybe three or four thousand bucks," Titanic said. He laughed curtly. "Why, how's he going to prove he lost any more? He hasn't got a case. You got witnesses!"

He glanced around at Charley's witnesses. For a moment they all felt better, thinking it was true. Titanic even made a last try through his mournfulness to make it a joke. He gave out a clumsy, heavy snort. "What a sucker," he grinned at Charley. "How do you like the ride?"

But neither Charley nor any of the others answered. They knew Rosnik would be able to prove something, though they did not know what. It was a frame-up, but so wild that it was real. They all felt their feet clamped to the ground.

"Close up," Charley said to Pete.

Pete flared up. "Close up?" he cried, but knowing what Charley meant this time. "You going to let Rosnik make you close up the place?"

"I think we'd better lock up for awhile," Charley said. Then he glanced toward Sarah. In the silent office the clusters of diamond grapes on her ears shone brightly. He looked at her for some seconds. "You wouldn't like to sell those earrings, would you, Sarah?" he asked. He was thinking how they would have looked on Lon, if they had gone to Florida. But now he already knew that they would never go. He got up without waiting for her answer.

Then hate like something tangible and deadly spread through the gambling place. It was hate for Rosnik. The place was not crowded now but a few men still bent tense and exhausted over the card tables, their growling laughter mixing with the fall of cards and rattle of chips, the click-clack of the ball on the roulette wheel in the front room where a few men still played, the sudden whirring of a deck being shuffled and the smell of paper money and bodies and smoke.

Frieda went around closing up the poker and blackjack games and then Pete went to silence the wheel, cashing in

the chips and stacking them neatly, while Sleigh got a broom to start sweeping the back room, looking from the corners of his eyes for coupons but not finding any more. Frieda began switching out the lights over the tables, the ovals of light swinging crooked for a moment while his heavy hands fumbled for the switch above the bulbs; the light was blotted; there was only the faint hum of the swinging cord. Titanic turned off the electric fan and in the office Ada poured a drink, filling a water glass half full and then going suddenly out to the water cooler to dump it out again. The Filipino came inside because it was growing cold outdoors and Sarah told him to wait, in a minute they would all be leaving. She laughed, her gold plate gleaming, because a dead leaf from the streets outside was caught in the Filipino's matted hair.

The hate fell first from Frieda's holes of eyes, like something solid spreading over the poker tables as he closed up the games and switched out the lights. It stuck in the cards and chips. Titanic stood in front of the dead electric fan, poking the propeller with his long finger, his breath coming regularly and heavy with hate. A knock on the door made Sleigh look through the peephole; but he would not open the door, even for big Magglioni trying to get in after he had closed up his speakeasy for the night. Sleigh looked at him as though anyone outside the door was a mortal enemy, from now on and until forever. Sarah asked Charley over for breakfast but Charley said No. Ada touched his arm and said, "That Rosnik bastard can't beat you," but Charley laughed, scratching his head, saying "I don't know, I don't know"; so that a hard revenge flashed on Ada's face and no one knew what she was thinking as she went out after Sarah. The last of the customers put on their coats to leave. Kersten, who knew good lawyers, sat talking with Charley for ten minutes before he left with Joe

Joseph. Outside the big place, he and Joseph halted a moment, looking around, and then walked off toward the dawnlight licking its way along the cold streets.

The place was all half-lights and long shadows. Only the ones who worked in the gambling place were left. Sleigh kept repeating what he had heard Ada say. He began to feel good saying it as he cleaned up the rooms, and stooped down, seeing a coupon, and repeated, "That big bastard Rosnik." Frieda pulled out a chair and sat down beside a dark table. Titanic spat right where Sleigh had cleaned the floor. Their hate changed and it wasn't Rosnik so much that they hated, but just what it had done to Charley. They began to argue, but not with each other. They argued alone against something absent. In each one the dignity he did not even know he possessed was outraged, and it made their hate snap out, like Frieda who sat with his lips clamped together; or Pete Senta who locked himself in the wash-room, combed his hair, and in hot-tempered rage swung his fist at his own reflection, the mirror shattering into his bloody knuckles.

"Where's Charley?" Pete asked. He came from the wash-room, his handkerchief wound around his fist.

"In the wheel room," Frieda said.

They waited. Alone in the wheel room, Charley looked at the chairs and stools stacked upside down on the table. Lifting the cover from the roulette wheel he gave it a spin with his fingers. He dropped the ivory ball into the groove and then listened to its racket as it spun around. His whole life was enmeshed with the racket of the ball rushing around the wheel. It was a warming sound, like his own blood coursing; he breathed more swiftly, listening to it, as though he were running. He watched the ball rush around the wheel, searching for its groove, pouncing in one, rocketing

out, finding another, always with its murmurous clatter. The wheel spun a long while. All his life was exactly what it was now—himself standing alone while the ball spun its endless magical course.

He knew he would have to go home and tell Lon. Suddenly she was the only abiding thing in his life. He thought of Paul, not knowing how this could not really hurt Paul any more, that Paul had begun to understand. But he also knew that this grossest of jokes was the last. He still could not believe it was possible. But he knew how defeated he was.

He had known at once that this was something he could not fix up. It was why Sergeant Harmon had sounded frightened, talking about the vice commission and the grand jury and the cleanup of bootlegging and gambling joints. Perhaps it was not so much himself ending as just his time ending. There would be no more like him. Harmon might even have known of the suit. Rosnik picked the right time. It did not matter whether Rosnik was right or not. He knew that now they would break him and that the rest and the peace and the getting well in Florida were gone. He saw the jury, the kind that would never believe a gambler, not himself or Pete or Frieda or Sleigh, the kind that perhaps had never held cards or dice in their hands. He saw himself fighting for his life.

Again he heard Alice's voice. And he saw Lon, her face silent and puzzled, not understanding why these things must be; but he also knew she would stand by him. He was certain and laughed softly to himself. He might settle with Rosnik's lawyers out of court for half the fifty thousand or even less. He could still go to Florida then and sit in the sun. But he knew he was going to fight it and that it hardly mattered whether he won or lost, lived or died or died broke. His time was done.

The fight might take months; a week or a day or one

minute too long. But he had fought tonight for everything that had meaning to him, and had been surprised at how viciously he fought. And he knew now he would fight again. This time he would have to fight in the open, not inside the walls of the big place, but before the whole world. He could hear all the voices; he had seen the looks a thousand times before in people's eyes. All the righteous glances and voices were like Alice's, and he heard them assailing himself, Lon, Paul: It's a shame, they said, honest people earning hard money for a man like that to steal from them. What kind of man must he be, too lazy for an honest day's work, good-for-nothing, a thief, robbing decent poor people like the Rosniks. And he heard Mrs. Rosnik's voice, from a year ago, and all the thousands of other voices ringing in with hers: What kind of man can do these things? Here it would be Christmas coming again, and what kind of Christmas would they have with no money to buy things for the kids? He heard the voices clearly over the clatter of the ball pouncing in the groove of the wheel. He heard himself arguing, but his voice growing more and more faint. He saw the righteous, contemptuous jury. He saw the Rosniks wisely wearing shabby, threadbare clothing in court. He did not know how they had framed him, what Rosnik's tricks would be, but he knew he was caught before the voices and stony eyes. And he still knew he was going to fight them because he had no choice.

At last the ivory ball nestled in one of the number grooves and the spinning of the wheel subsided. It ran down silently. He re-covered the wheel and turned out the light over the table. He picked up his hat. As he made his way toward the door he knocked over one of the chairs accidentally—as he glanced back in the half dark, the room had a look of angry chaos, the tipped chair, the empty table, the dust

and stale smoke curling in the light that crept through the cracks in the boarded windows. Again he had the feeling of something ended. And as he left the room, there was no one to tell him that it did not matter how it ended, the thing had been, he had at least started at this place and ended at that. He had what few had. He had been. He was.

CHAPTER TWO

THEY WERE all waiting. They looked at each other. He gave them each a month's extra salary and said Frieda and Sleigh might as well keep on living there, even though the place was locked up. Maybe sometime they could open up again. Frieda and Sleigh could be watchdogs, he said. But each one knew the big place would never run again.

He took his bankroll with him. Pete said why didn't they all go down to Magglioni's, get him to open up, and have a few drinks and a poker game? But Charley shook his head. He was going home and wanted to see Lon.

Sleigh held open the door. Pete, Titanic and Charley went out together. A white light hung in the sky and the cold made Charley turn up his collar. He sniffed the crisp air. Good fishing weather, he said. Titanic nodded and raised his hand slightly and started off one way, while Pete walked with Charley down the block toward the Cadillac. A gust of wind blew Charley's hat off and Pete had to run fifteen or twenty feet to chase it. Charley was laughing.

Halfway to the car they saw a newsboy. He looked up at them sleepily. "Paper?"

Charley looked down with a quizzical glance at the up-turned face of the newsboy, who looked unhealthy in the white dawn.

"Let's see," Charley said.

He took the paper from the boy. He did not think he would see it so soon, but there it was, already shouting at

him, headlines about himself that made him blanch. Pete read it quickly and made an angry gesture with his bandaged knuckles.

"What's wrong with your hand?" Charley asked.

"Nothing," Pete said.

"Buy the paper, mister?" the boy asked with sleepy impatience.

"You bet," Charley said. Suddenly he was reaching into his pocket, fumbling for a roll of bills. "Give me the whole stack—I'll take all you've got."

Then he stood on the curb, watching the newsboy race down the street with the bills he had got for his papers, turning out of sight down the alleyway next to the big place before Charley could change his mind. Charley glanced at the stack of papers he held. A truck drove by. It was a news truck, its van loaded with papers like those he held in his arms. He looked at Pete and chuckled to himself, because for a moment he had really thought he had hushed the whole thing up, by buying all the papers, had wiped it out and that it had never happened at all.

In the gambling place, Frieda wondered how long they could keep on living there, a month or six months or a year, before he would have to go outside. Sleigh locked the door and came to sit at the table with him in the little pantry off the office. He took out all the coupons he had found that night, unfolding them and slapping them smooth with his hand. Frieda's eyes were nearly closed, with sleepiness Sleigh thought, but when he pushed over the coupons, thirty-six of them, Frieda looked down at them. But he did not pick them up.

Sleigh was disappointed. He liked being happy and thought of something else. "I'll fix some eggs," he said.

But Frieda wasn't hungry. Then Sleigh got up and leaned in silence against the boarded window and listened. Outside the wind died down. He began to laugh. But Frieda looked at him and he stopped laughing.

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